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DRAGON

A Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game Supplement

Editorial:
Dial D and D for Murder

By Christopher Perkins

Illustration by Anne Stokes

Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue™ has been on store shelves for a couple weeks now, and if you like running or playing in D&D® campaigns laced with intrigue, the book holds great promise. It's easy to become snared in the drow web of murder and politics, and the setting works whether you're playing drow characters or outsiders.

Intrigue is an essential ingredient in my home campaigns. For intrigue to work, a D&D campaign needs three things. The first is layer upon layer of mysteries to be solved. A DM needs to riddle the campaign with secrets, and then pile more secrets on top of them so that when the characters solve one mystery, more mysteries present themselves.

The second thing is a healthy balance of truth and lies. If everything the characters learn is true, the intrigue becomes harder to sustain. Sometimes the players learn things they believe to be true (and the DM might believe they're true as well), but some of these facts must later be proven false. Maybe the characters jumped to the wrong conclusion. Maybe they were deceived, or their source was unreliable. Maybe the DM changed his or her mind. When things that were true suddenly turn false, the players begin to question everything, and doubt breeds intrigue.

The third thing an intrigue campaign needs is shades of gray. The lines between good and evil are blurry. Former enemies might become allies, and current friends might become foes. It's not always clear who can be trusted.

This month's ezine content is layered with intrigue. We have an article on Zehir, the god of murder. Tied to the Forgotten Realms® setting, we have a feature on Manshoon, the leader of the Zhentarim who relies on cloning magic to oversee his vast network of agents and assassins (and to defy death); an article on the shapechanging malaugrym (creatures at the heart of many evil conspiracies in the Realms); and a piece on the Xanathar, the beholder crime lord of Waterdeep—who also plays a mysterious role in one of this month's adventures.

Intrigue is a central theme of the Eberron® setting. In this month's "Eye on Eberron" column, Keith Baker portrays three members of the Aurum, a subversive organization that treats the power brokers of Khorvaire like puppets. The organization also sits at the heart of a campaign-shaking conspiracy that unravels in "Dead for a Spell," which opens with a murder mystery concealing layers of intrigue and a multitude of memorable villains, among them a halfling crime lord, agents of the Five Nations, a vampiric femme fatale, and a gold-plated warforged bodyguard. To succeed, the heroes must peel back the mysteries, cleave through the deceptions, and forge tenuous alliances—all the things that make intrigue such fun!

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Channel Divinity: Zehir, the Midnight Serpent

By Tim Eagon

Illustration by Beth Trott

In public, it is easy to repudiate Zehir's murderous creed. Alone in the shadows, however, normally good-hearted people sometimes whisper desperate prayers to the god of darkness. As the lord of assassins, Zehir showers his blessings on those who kill; he does not care about a murderer's motives or dwell on whether a victim's fate is deserved. Some murmur that killers do not have to beg Zehir for his aid if they want him to take notice, because he knows when thoughts of murder creep into a person's mind.

Zehir typically uses dreams and portents to encourage prospective murderers to carry out their homicidal impulses. A hissing voice heard only in sleep might urge the unwell to act on their most violent desires, even as poison and weapons unexpectedly find their way into a would-be killer's hands. Zehir takes such a keen interest in killing because he devours the souls of anyone murdered in his name or with his assistance. No amount of murder or living sacrifice on the part of his followers can satisfy the Midnight Serpent's insatiable hunger.

Zehir is an unpopular god whose dark portfolio and association with poisonous serpents keep his followers few in number. In the mortal world, his faith reached the zenith of its power during the time of Zannad, the vile empire of the yuan-ti. Today, only the most evil and amoral communities openly tolerate his worship. One of the largest temples to Zehir outside the deity's dark realm of Tytherion is the Fane of Night in Gloomwrought. Even there, however, his followers keep their activities shrouded in secrecy.

Zehir has no allies among his fellow gods, who accurately view him and his followers as dangerous and untrustworthy. Indeed, his last divine ally was the goddess Khala, slain by the Raven Queen. Zehir's loyalty to the gods during the Dawn War was always in question, and many of his fellow deities suspect that he betrayed Io because he coveted that god's draconic creations. That was not Zehir's only act of deicide—his blood was used to slay his own daughter, the goddess of redemption, Nusemnee. Zehir forbids his followers from worshiping other gods, and those who are caught doing so become sacrifices to their erstwhile patron.

The earliest theologians to study Zehir and his cults divided his faithful into three groups known as the Coils. The First Coil consists of people who request Zehir's aid but do not actively worship him. The Second Coil is made up of mortals who venerate Zehir by forming murderous sects dedicated to the god of darkness. The Third Coil encompasses Zehir's most fanatical reptilian worshipers, which view

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themselves as his elite agents. It includes such creatures as yuan-ti and nagas, as well as the snaketongue cultists who serve them.

The First Coil

The First Coil contains the bulk of those who pray to Zehir. Though this group includes assassins, poisonmakers, and others who pay homage to the Midnight Serpent out of professional obligation, the First Coil consists mostly of ordinary people who call on the powers of darkness out of fear, jealousy, or weakness.

Zehir intuitively knows when idle thoughts of murder turn serious, and he ruthlessly manipulates vulnerable people into committing homicidal acts. The god of assassins sends recurring dreams to influence the behavior of would-be murderers. He might depict a blissful future for a struggling merchant who yearns to eliminate her rivals, or he could drive a jilted suitor to murderous rage with visions of his love in the arms of another. If his would-be acolytes are hesitant, Zehir has been known to send visions to the intended victim instead, hoping to inspire an even more intense murderous reaction. Zehir never closes the door to anyone who calls on him in moments of weakness, since he is an eminently patient god.

In rare circumstances—usually if an intended victim's death would directly further his goals—Zehir takes a more direct approach. A murder that eliminates a major obstacle to one of Zehir's cults, strikes personally at the powerful acolytes of his enemies, or corrupts a righteous individual can inspire the Midnight Serpent to manifest directly before the would-be murderer. In these cases, Zehir takes the form of a shadowy humanoid or serpentine figure that speaks in sibilant whispers. He promises his help to ensure success and safety in the dark deed of murder, but he does not make clear that the price for such service is the murderer's soul. A character who accepts Zehir's assistance in this way feels an unpleasant chill as body and mind are corrupted by a tendril of the dark god's power.

The malignancy of Zehir slowly twists and corrupts those who call on his power. They become cold, uncaring, and violent as their obsession with killing their intended victims consumes them. Some of Zehir's most powerful clerics and blackguards have been seduced and transformed in this way.

The Faith of the Midnight Serpent

The power of the evil god of darkness, poison, and assassins can be further explored in the venomed soul paragon path in *Dragon* 379 and the channel divinity power *Zehir's dark blessing* in the *Book of Vile Darkness*™.

The Second Coil

Most of Zehir's professed worshipers are part of the Second Coil. They typically organize themselves into secretive cults composed of fewer than a dozen members, most of which are humans or shades. Larger cults center on assassins' guilds based in metropolitan areas, and they covertly attempt to seize power under the direction of the Third Coil. Second Coil cultists are not especially devout, tending instead to be violent sociopaths attracted to Zehir's faith for the thrill they receive from violence and murder. The Midnight Serpent does not care about the sincerity of his faithful as long as they continue to sacrifice victims to him.

The leaders of the Second Coil cults are true worshipers of Zehir, hoping to shed their mortal forms and join the Third Coil by feeding souls to their dark god. Devout mortal acolytes believe that this transformation is essential to surviving the coming apocalypse that Zehir will instigate. These cult leaders are almost uniformly psychopathic, delighting in murder for its own sake.

Each cult of the Second Coil congregates once a month on the night of the new moon. At midnight, Zehir's faithful come together at locations selected for their isolation, including secluded glens, abandoned ruins, and dank sewers. Each cultist arrives alone, carries no light source, and dons a black hood to hide his or her face. Only the leaders of a cult know the identities of all the cult's members.

When they gather, the cultists show their faith by whispering chants and prayers while handling poisonous snakes. The cult's leaders prepare the snakes before the ceremony by anointing them with Zehir's holy symbol drawn in black paint. They then antagonize the serpents by striking them, believing that these enraged snakes will not attack if Zehir judges their handlers worthy. Participants do not benefit from resistance or immunity to poison during the ceremony, so anyone bitten must stoically endure the snake's venom as penance. Those that succumb to the poison are accepted as sacrifices to their dark god's hunger.

These monthly ceremonies end with a ritual sacrifice. The victim is someone that the cultists believe no one will miss, chosen from among vagrants, itinerant peddlers, adventurers, and the like. Zehir's cults particularly prize wandering priests of Avandra, the dark god's most hated enemy. The cultists lash their bound and gagged victim to a tree or rock, then unleash a special ceremonial serpent. This snake slithers across the victim, biting repeatedly before disappearing into the darkness. The victim is then left to suffer and die alone, though the cultists linger in the general vicinity to handle the removal of the corpse and any other evidence of the cult's presence.

Cultists keep a low profile between their gatherings, but they continue to prey on the weak and defenseless. The members of a specific cult rarely

murder more than one or two people between monthly services, and when they do so, they try not to draw attention to themselves. Zehir's cultists use slow-acting poisons or suffocation as their preferred weapons, or they attempt to make a murder look like an accident or a natural death. People often mistake a cult's depredations for random street crime, banditry, or monster attacks.

Some cultists take on professions that enable them to travel widely and to kill with plausible deniability, working as healers, apothecaries, and midwives. Others among Zehir's worshipers are adventurers—primarily assassins, avengers, blackguards, clerics, and rogues. Since they keep their religious affiliation a secret, such adventurers can travel across diverse lands and kill with impunity—if not with the sanction of the authorities.

The cults of the Midnight Serpent have no official faith days, but cultists mark lunar and solar eclipses as harbingers of Zehir's eventual victory over his bitter enemies, Pelor and Sehanine. At such times, cults abandon their normal restraint in the name of mass murder, engaging in acts such as surreptitiously poisoning a village's well to coincide with an eclipse.

Zehir's adherents subtly denote their allegiance by wearing decorations in serpentine motifs that they can easily remove or hide, including jewelry or innocuous tattoos. The Midnight Serpent shows his appreciation or displeasure by way of dreams, through the appearance of serpents that convey messages (whether verbally, telepathically, or through their markings), "accidental" poisonings of people and animals, and the spontaneous sprouting of venomous plants. Zehir's worshipers consider finding shed snakeskins to be a good omen.

It is not easy to join a cult of Zehir, and a prospective member must have murdered at least one innocent person. If the murderer readily embraced Zehir during the act, a cult leader guided by a dream will extend an invitation to the individual on one condition: He or she must kill again in the name of Zehir before the next new moon, knowing that doing so condemns the victim's soul to the Midnight Serpent. If the murderer follows through, a black hood appears among his or her belongings the next day. A person who dons the hood on the night of the next new moon is visited by a black-scaled serpent that leads the way to the cult's secret gathering. A new initiate handles the ceremonial serpent first, and he or she is the one to release it upon the sacrificial victim.

To ascend to a leadership position within a cult, a member must willingly murder a person important to him or her—usually a family member, a spouse, or a lover—and deliver that victim's soul to Zehir. When the murder is committed, the cult's leaders indoctrinate the hopeful acolyte further into the mysteries of Zehir's faith and its dark rituals. Upon acceptance into the cult's highest ranks, a new leader meets the cult's true masters: the reptilian creatures that make up the Third Coil.

The Third Coil

To be a part of the Third Coil, a creature must have devoted both body and soul to Zehir. Members of the Third Coil view themselves as the dark god's chosen, and they regard those who lack reptilian features as being inherently inferior. The members of this elite group include yuan-ti, dark nagas, medusas, wereserpents, and corrupted humans known as snaketongue cultists. Most Third Coil cultists live in the wilds, particularly in warmer climates. Snaketongue cultists and yuan-ti that can pass as human frequently infiltrate nearby settlements with the assistance of Second Coil servants, seeking converts, sacrifices, and power.

Members of the Third Coil follow Zehir without question. Their main goal is to feed him a steady diet of souls, since they believe that when the dark god gains the strength needed to defeat his enemies, he will devour the sun and wrap his coils around the mortal world, covering all in eternal darkness. His creations will then rise up and rule in his name.

The cultists of the Third Coil monitor and control the activities of Zehir's lesser cults, recruiting exceptional candidates into their ranks. The yuan-ti and naga leaders of the Third Coil are born into its hierarchy. These creatures reign supreme over the Third Coil cultists that are tainted by their human lineage, many of which have ascended through the ranks of the Second Coil.

Recruits to the Third Coil must endure vile rituals and imbibe copious amounts of poison. Those who survive the ordeal acquire minor reptilian features such as patches of scales, slitted eyes, or a forked tongue, as well as enhanced skills, poisonous attacks, and magical powers. On rare occasions, a powerful individual from outside the cult might be kidnapped and forcibly transformed into a snaketongue cultist. When this process is complete, the broken victim has no choice but to accept his or her fate.

Paragon Path

In carrying out the orders of Zehir's high priests without fail, you have conveyed many souls to the dark god's maw and earned great honor. Now, by replacing a portion of your soul with the darkness he commands, Zehir marks you as a worthy servant and transforms you into one of his blessed fangs. You have fought fiercely for this accolade, and members of the Third Coil accord you the respect you have earned as one of Zehir's most zealous servants.

As a fang of Zehir, your overriding concern is feeding as many souls as possible to your god. You are a holy slayer, dispatched on special missions by Zehir and his high priests. As a reward for your faith, Zehir will alter your mind and body to reflect his glory. It is said that the most faithful of the fangs of Zehir eventually shed their warm-blooded forms altogether, becoming living reflections of their divine master.

Fang of Zehir

Prerequisite: Must worship Zehir

Level 11: Serpent's Speed

The more you dedicate yourself to Zehir, the more snakelike your essence becomes. New layers of sinuous and serpentine muscle let you race into battle against the foes of your dark god.

Benefit: You gain a +1 bonus to speed.

Level 11: Envenomed Action

As you slither across the battlefield, you call on your god to lend the serpent's bite to your most heroic efforts. The Midnight Serpent sinks his fangs into your enemies, growing stronger on their pain.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to use a weapon attack power, each creature hit by the power also takes ongoing 10 poison damage and is slowed (save ends both).

Level 11: Surge of Poison

Zehir is the author of the *Book of All Venoms*, and he dispenses deadly knowledge from this tome to enhance the attacks of his devout followers.

Surge of Poison Fang of Zehir Attack 11

As you whisper a prayer to Zehir, your attack is imbued with a debilitating poison that cripples your foe.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Poison, Shadow
No Action **Special**
Trigger: You hit a creature with a melee attack.
Effect: The creature takes 2d10 extra poison damage from the attack and grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

Level 12: Shadow Serpent Form

You scoff at the lowly snaketongue cultists and their ability to transform into mundane constrictors. Zehir has personally blessed you with the power to assume the form of one his most revered servants, the shadow serpent.

Shadow Serpent Form Fang of Zehir Utility 12

Zehir rewards your growing devotion by granting you the ability to become a living manifestation of his power.

At-Will ✦ Divine, Polymorph, Shadow
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You change from your humanoid form to the form of a shadow serpent or vice versa. When you change from serpent form to humanoid form, you can shift 1 square.

While in serpent form, you retain your game statistics and size, you cannot attack, and you have darkvision and a +5 power bonus to Stealth checks, which you can make using any cover or concealment, including cover from your allies. Also, your movement imposes no penalty on your Stealth checks.

Your equipment becomes part of this form, and you continue to gain the benefit of the equipment you wear, except shields and item powers. While equipment is part of your serpent form, it cannot be removed, and anything in a container that is part of your serpent form is inaccessible.

Special: You can use this power only once per round.

Level 16: More Souls for Zehir

When you deliver a soul to the Midnight Serpent, it serves only to whet Zehir's insatiable appetite. Craving more souls, your god blesses your blade so that you can deliver victims to him that previously would have been harder to kill.

Benefit: Your attacks ignore poison resistance.

Level 20: Fingers of Zehir

This dreadful prayer allows you to channel the terrifying power of a yuan-ti anathema, transforming your weapon into a tangle of venomous cobras.

Fingers of Zehir Fang of Zehir Attack 20

With shocking suddenness, your weapon transforms into a clutch of writhing serpents that lash out against your foes.

Daily ✦ Divine, Poison, Shadow, Weapon
Standard Action **Close** blast 3
Target: Each enemy in the blast
Attack: Highest ability modifier vs. Fortitude
Hit: 3[W] + your highest ability modifier poison damage, and ongoing 10 poison damage (save ends).
Miss: Half damage.

About the Author

Tim Eagon is a freelance writer who lives in Madison, Wisconsin. He has written several articles for *Dragon* and *Dungeon*, including "The Oasis of the Golden Peacock," "Ecology of the Hengeyokai," and "Class Acts: Swordmage–The Winterguard of Cendriane."

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Eye on Eberron

The Aurum

Binding with Chains of Gold

By Keith Baker

Illustration by Chris Seaman

Don't look at the skies today—you might be blinded by the gleam of gold! Lord Antus ir'Soldorak's gilded galleon has come to Sharn, and an inside source tells me that tonight's celebration at the Aurum Hall is going to make the Tain Gala look like a soup line in Fallen. Oh, to be rich!

—Faris d'Ghallanda, bartender

Aurum halls can be found in every major city in the land, and the members of this fraternity include many of the wealthiest and most influential people in Khorvaire. For a social club, the Aurum has some curious policies; it typically rejects applications from major nobles or powerful dragonmarked heirs. Chancellor Antus ir'Soldorak explains that the Aurum is an alliance of innovators, and that it doesn't accept princes who were born to wealth but have no talents to accompany it.

Others hold to a more sinister theory—that the leaders of the Aurum want to change the current order of things, bringing down the established aristocracy and shattering dragonmarked monopolies to place more power in the hands of the Aurum plutocrats. Those who espouse this theory point to the sigil of the Aurum: a golden crown encircled by a heavy chain. The image seems decorative, but skeptics say it symbolizes a crown bound by chains of gold—recalling the way the lords of the Aurum are using their wealth to wrap their chains around Khorvaire.

While paranoids and skeptics debate what the group might really be up to, there's no disputing that the Aurum is part of daily life. Anyone with sufficient wealth and influence can seek membership in the Copper Concord; its ranks include military officers, merchants, barristers, sages, and more. As one rises up to the higher concords, membership becomes more exclusive. It takes brilliance and vast wealth to attain membership in the Gold Concord or the Platinum Concord.

Capsule portraits of three Aurum Concordians are provided here—a female gnome with a renowned collection of birds, a business mogul trying to resurrect the nation of Cyre, and the deceptively decrepit dwarf who runs the show.

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Alina Lorridan Lyrris

Khyber's Daughter

As a child, Alina loved to wander through her clan's gem mines. Shortly after she inherited control of the family holdings, her miners tapped into one of the richest deposits of Khyber shards ever found in Khorvaire. The elemental binding industry has a constant need for Khyber shards, and, with the development of the airship and production of elemental weaponry for Breland, this demand has ramped up dramatically over the past century . . . which has made Alina Lorridan Lyrris one of the wealthiest women in Khorvaire.

Alina plays the role of the hedonistic socialite. She has residences in Sharn, Wroat, Fairhaven, Stormhome, and every major city in Zilargo; wherever she goes, she throws parties and attends the local gala events. Beneath this, she is a brilliant schemer with a hand in dozens of intrigues and ties to many criminal organizations. She's an active player in the schemes of the Shadow Cabinet (the inner circle of leaders who direct the Aurum's far-ranging goals), with a personal interest in undermining the power of House Cannith. She constantly works to expand her holdings and mining interests.

In addition to these business dealings, she has a number of personal interests. Alina is an accomplished wizard with a particular interest in Khyber shards; she's always interested in acquiring an unusual shard or stealing a dragonshard focus prototype from the Twelve. Beyond this, she takes a perverse pleasure in corruption. She enjoys placing truly noble people in situations where they are faced with difficult moral decisions, perhaps as a way of justifying her own amoral actions. When a writer for the *Korranberg Chronicle* called her "Khyber's Daughter," it was due as much to this love of discord as to the source of her wealth.

Alina Lorridan Lyrris is a beautiful and brilliant gnome. She is fond of platinum jewelry bearing Khyber shards, often infused with defensive enchantments. Her strengths are her intellect and her charisma, combined with tremendous wealth and a talent for arcane magic. Her specialties are transformation, binding, and illusion; few things in her quarters are exactly as they appear, and it's said that her famous menagerie of birds is actually made up of people who crossed her and were polymorphed. She is a careful planner from a culture that has refined paranoia to an art form, and she has magical means of escape on hand at all times. Though she can be an enemy, Alina can also make an interesting ally; she is willing to fund adventurers if they'll perform errands for her, but she'll try to steer them into situations that will force them to question their beliefs and morals.

- Alina is especially interested in Khyber shards and magic items powered by them. As such, she is a potential purchaser for any such objects the characters might acquire—items that either can't be sold through normal markets or that will fetch a better price from her.
- Alina has constructed a soul trap using Khyber shards that should be able to bind any sort of celestial or fiend. She wants the characters to test it for her . . . on the Inspired ambassador. Alternatively, she might employ the heroes as bodyguards at an embassy party while she attempts to accomplish the binding herself—without telling the PCs of her true plans at the party.
- One of Alina's rivals (a member of another gnome family, House Cannith, or even the Gatekeepers) is suspicious of her seemingly endless supply of Khyber shards. This patron wants the adventurers to investigate the depths of the primary Lyrriman mine. Is the operation what it claims, or is Alina in league with aberrant or demonic forces?

Loyal Daison

Ghetto King of Karrlakton

The Mourning was the best thing that ever happened to Loyal Daison. Born to a family of masons and military engineers, Daison earned his first fortune as a contractor during the war. He invested his newfound wealth in property in and around Karrlakton, picking up buildings damaged in battle or abandoned by those fleeing the war. By the time of the Mourning, he owned a full one-eighth of the property in Karrlakton.

When people poured out of Cyre in the aftermath of the catastrophe, Daison was ready to give them a place to stay . . . for a price. Daison took his pick of the treasures those refugees had salvaged from their nation. For those who couldn't pay, Daison offered service contracts; now, many people are bound to him, working off a debt that will take decades to pay. He continues to invest his profits in Karrlakton; a common joke in the city is that an unlikely event will happen "When Daison stops spending."

Because of his work in the war, Daison has strong ties to many of the southern warlords of Karrnath, and he has strengthened these bonds with generous contributions and bribes. He has a host of indentured servants; some say that more Cyrans serve Loyal Daison than Prince Oargev of New Cyre. Although Daison has provided the refugees with lodging and work, most of his buildings are wretched slums. He has given homes to the refugees of Cyre—but he has done little to give them hope.

Loyal Daison is a heavyset human male in his early forties. He lost his left hand in an industrial accident and wears a prosthetic of gold and steel. He has a deep voice and a booming laugh. He's an exceptional architect and has a keen eye for investments. Since the Treaty of Thronehold, he has been purchasing the rights to territory in the Mournland from Cyrans, and he is investing considerable capital

in Mournland salvage expeditions; convinced that it is possible for Cyre to recover from the Mourning, he has assembled an impressive think tank of sages and arcanists, the Daison Institute, to study its effects.

Like most members of the Aurum, Loyal Daison can serve as a wealthy patron or a dangerous enemy—potentially both in the same campaign. Consider the following ideas.

- At the start of their careers, Cyran characters could have relatives who have signed indentured servitude contracts with Daison in exchange for shelter; alternatively, the characters themselves could be bound by such a contract. Daison could offer release from the contract in exchange for undertaking a dangerous service.
- A family of poor Cyrans asks the adventurers to recover a family heirloom from the Mournland. However, Loyal Daison also wants this relic, and he has sent his own team to recover it. Can the characters get there first?
- The Daison Institute can be a resource for the characters, and thus might fund an expedition or pay for knowledge or relics from the Mournland. In time, the institute's sages hope to find a way to push back the dead-gray mist. Loyal Daison, of course, is interested ultimately only in personal gain. Under his direction, engineers at the institute are looking for ways to harness the force behind the Mourning and weaponize it on a smaller scale.

Antus ir'Soldorak

Master of Coin

When the Aurum was founded in the Mror Holds centuries ago, it was an act of rebellion. Galifar was then the dominant power in the region, and members of the Aurum believed that House Kundarak had abandoned the dwarves when it allied with the Twelve. Through the Aurum, the lords of the mines would use their wealth and resources to gain power over their rivals. Antus Soldorak was once the youngest member of the Aurum. Today, he is both the chancellor of the Platinum Concord and a member of the Shadow Cabinet, and one step closer to achieving his childhood dream.

Antus's holdings include gold and platinum mines. Following the secession of the Mror Holds, he founded the Soldorak Mint, and his currency is now commonplace throughout Karrnath and the Lhazaar Principalities. He has invested his wealth across the Five Nations, and could have an interest in any sort of industry that serves the needs of an adventure. He is determined to break the power of the Twelve and stamp out the last vestiges of Galifar, and to this end he searches for new industrial and magical developments—seeking to fund such endeavors and exploit their results before the knowledge can be acquired or destroyed by the Twelve. He has an enormous gilded airship, *Chains of Gold*, which includes its own *speaking stone* station and an infirmary with cutting-edge Jorasco facilities . . . all of which are operated by dragonmarked excoriates loyal solely to Soldorak. Soldorak spends most of his time aboard his ship, flying from city to city to oversee local operations. He purchased his noble title from King Kaius III when Karrnath was in desperate financial straits, and takes pleasure in lording over the people who once oppressed his homeland.

Soldorak is an elderly male dwarf. Though he is physically weak, he has an amazing talent for reading motivations and bending people to his will. This talent could be subtle sorcery or psionic power, or just raw skill; whatever its source, he can predict exactly what strings he needs to pull to control someone. If he makes an enemy, he will find out everything he can about that individual, to best assess weaknesses and strengths. His power isn't physical; it is his ability to wrap his victims in chains of gold, using his wealth to offer them the things they desire—or to threaten the people they can't defend.

Antus ir'Soldorak can be connected to any sort of scheme that would weaken the nobility or the dragonmarked houses, or increase the power of the Aurum. A couple of ideas:

- Antus ir'Soldorak wants to outfit the characters and provide them with information they need in order to ransack one of House Kundarak's high-security vaults. The vault holds vast wealth, but Soldorak doesn't want any of it; his only interest is the terrible publicity that the theft will bring to Kundarak. If the heroes are successful, they could find the treasure to be artifacts from Cyrans who were slain during the Mourning; will the characters keep the wealth, or share it with Cyran refugees?
- Soldorak recognizes the talents of a wizard or an artificer character and offers to fund her, allowing her to create items she normally couldn't afford. However, when Soldorak begins mass-producing this breakthrough, the characters are caught up in a conflict between the Aurum and the Twelve.

About the Author

Keith Baker is the creator of the Eberron campaign setting and designer of the card game *Gloom*. He owes everything he has to the generous funding of the Soldorak Foundation for the Arts. You can find him on Twitter as @HellcowKeith.

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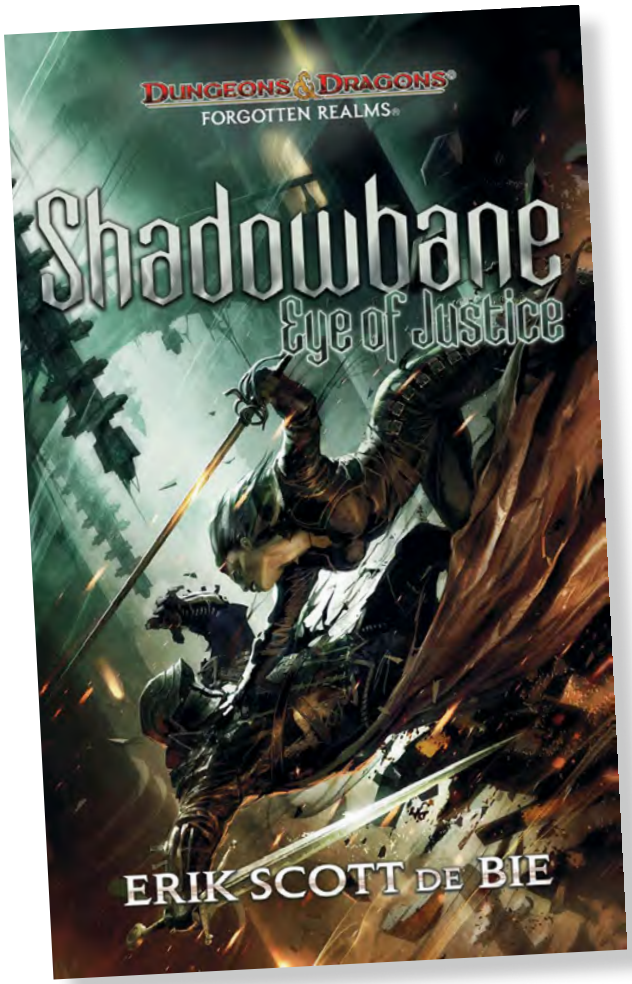

29 Nightal, the Year of the Fifth Circle (1476 DR)
Westgate

Snow swirled outside the windows of the Rotten Root tavern. Inside, pipe smoke and laughter filled the stuffy common room, partially obscuring the otherwise unadorned charms of the dancer trying to get Kalen Dren's attention.

The Mask Dance was one of the more alluring imports to Westgate in recent years: a risqué act in which the performer wore a fanciful mask and nothing else. Apparently, it had hit Cormyr like a marauding horde earlier that year, and dancers in Suzail worked all through the nights and most of the days. The dance had proved almost as popular in Westgate, and drew in a goodly amount of coin for the Root. Merchants and peasants alike sought out the establishment, whose limber dancers (male and female both, all oiled to perfection) rarely failed to impress and titillate.

In this particular dance, neither the dancer's phoenix mask nor her bare figure could distract her young patron, and both of them knew it. Kalen appreciated, however, how hard she tried to win his favor and coin. It made her all the more appealing to use as a cover.

"My gratitude," Kalen said when she was done. He slid two gold coins across the table toward her. "Another?"

"Of course, saer." She began another dance, one that involved stretching her legs over her head and wriggling her toes a hand's breadth from his face. "Does this please you?"

"Well enough."

His chin propped on his hand, Kalen made a show of scrutinizing the woman who writhed on the table, while in truth he took in the rest of the common room. He watched, he listened, and he paid heed to his instincts. He noted which thieves gathered to discuss the night's take or a forthcoming job, which traders swindled which merchants and vice versa. He attuned his senses to the ragged heartbeat of Westgate's criminal underworld, feeling for its secrets and deceptions. His mentor, Levia, called it "insightful watching," a technique she had learned from her own teacher long ago.

Kalen, on the other hand, called it boring. He wanted to be out in the night, running from rooftop to rooftop, fighting villains and smiting shadows. But his mentor insisted he maintain his skill in that most basic skulduggery technique: observation. And so listen and watch he did. He would be vigilant like Helm, God of Guardians. He would be wise like Gedrin Shadowbane, first of the Eye of Justice.

A trio of Fire Knives he'd been shadowing for several tendays spoke in disgust of opposition from Nine Golden Swords rebels. A war was brewing between the two gangs, one in which the Eye of Justice had stayed frustratingly neutral. By all accounts, as recently as seven years ago, before he had come to Westgate, the Eye would have been heavily involved, taking down both gangs to preserve the peace. That

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the Fire Knives had risen to power at all was a travesty, and recently the Eye had even started taking bribes and favors from the villains. Gedrin Shadowbane would be grieved at what had become of his vision.

It disgusted Kalen that the Eye would consort with thieves and thugs, but things were getting better. Kalen had made a considerable impact on the organization seven years ago by returning with Gedrin's famous sword, Vindicator, which marked him as Gedrin's anointed heir and the chosen servant of the Threefold God. In doing so, he'd levied considerable pressure on the leadership of the Eye to clean up the organization. Ever since, Lord Seer Uthias Darkwell had seen fit to distance the Eye from the gangs' petty squabbles.

Considering he'd overseen the Eye's descent into thievery in the first place, the Lord Seer had proved surprisingly amenable to purifying the guild's behavior. Though Levia was optimistic that Darkwell had changed and that the rest of the Eye would surely follow, Kalen had not grown up trusting to hope. The thief in him warned him to be dubious, and so he was. If Darkwell had truly returned to Lord Gedrin's path, why had he not turned the strength of the Eye to doing some good in Westgate, rather than feasting on the city's dead like a scavenger? The street soldiers of the organization still took bribes, roughed up citizens, and generally indulged in the tactics of bullies. Nothing ever seemed to change.

Whenever Kalen brought up his doubts, Levia urged him to declare himself the rightful leader of the Eye and sweep away the old powers. This he knew he could not do. Kalen hadn't acquired the political clout to do so. And did he really want to lead the Eye? After seven years of training—years spent yearning for an end to the guild's corruption—Kalen had grown weary. There had to be a better way.

He wished his mentor would hurry up and get to the Rotten Root before his anger took him over.

"Saer." The phoenix-masked dancer appeared at his side, a robe belted over her sweaty skin. Her dance must have ended during his reverie; . He had not even noticed. "My shift is done. Perhaps you might accompany me . . . elsewhere?"

"Do you need an escort home, good lady?" he asked. "The streets are perilous."

The dancer bit her lip. "I worry about the cold, actually. I need warmth." She ran her hand over his left shoulder, which he barely felt through his curse. He'd been a prisoner in his own body for years now, indifferent to all but the extremes of pain or pleasure.

"Then I hope you've a coat," he said. "You might have some of that stew on the fire before you leave. It's very warm."

Her face registered a flicker of frustration. "Will you accompany me or not?"

"Oh, sorry," Kalen said. "I am, alas, meeting someone."

"A woman, perchance?"

"Indeed." His mentor Levia was, after all, a woman. "Why?"

"No reason. At all." The dancer turned away, looking disgusted, and walked away.

Kalen wondered what had made her so upset.

"You can really be daft when it comes to women, no?" piped up a tiny voice. The halfling Cellica—his sister by bond if not by blood—hopped up onto the bench next to him. "That one practically threw herself at you, and you didn't even notice."

"She did?" Kalen shook his head. "I've a good deal on my mind."

"Too much to notice twin blessings like *that*?" Cellica cupped her hands over her chest. "That one must be touched by Sharess, and she wanted *you* to touch her. Idiot."

"Perhaps you should go after her, then," Kalen said. "Or is she too tall for your taste?"

Cellica blushed a little. "I prefer my lasses somewhat more robust, in truth."

"I'm sure."

Cellica joined him for a drink—or, rather, she drank both of their ales, since he rarely indulged. Kalen found it soothing to listen to her chatter on about the daily fashions in Westgate: which noble patronized such-and-such salon, what scandal had become the talk of the town, and which dresses Silks of Dawn had created that absolutely *everyone* had to have for the spring.

Many of the rumors in Westgate circled around the scandalous courtship of Muorn Cormaeril and Rigante Bleth, the First Lord's daughter and heir apparent to the Fire Knives, and through them Westgate. Both families had been exiled from Cormyr as traitors in years past, but Cormaeril had regained at least part of its standing while Bleth remained a bitter enemy of the Dragon Kingdom. That one of Cormaeril's sons might wed the daughter of the Fire Knives shocked the nobility, but so far Rigante had shown little interest in the assassins' guild. Instead, she rode with the Draeven marauders of Proskur sworn to repel Cormyr from the city and thwart the Dragon Kingdom's supposed imperialist aims. Rumors circulated, however, and Cellica reveled in the gossip.

"They call her the Fire Princess, for her hair and her temper," the halfling said dreamily. "Strong, beautiful, rich, wields a blade as well as any sellsword and better than most . . . Now *that* would be a woman not to turn down."

"I really don't think—" Kalen stopped, caught in mid-sentence by a familiar scent: oiled leather with a faint touch of juniper.

Levia Shadewalker had arrived.

Kalen knew immediately something was the matter, because of the direct path his mentor took to him. Cursed with a forgettable face despite the half-elf heritage that should have made her lovely, Levia took full advantage of her unassuming presence when skulking, but tonight she drew every eye in the Rotten Root. Part of it was the symbol of the Eye of Justice

she wore openly on her breastplate, suggesting she came on official guild business. Kalen himself never wore the symbol, as eyes tended to widen and mouths to seal when he displayed it, which was precisely Levia's intention now. Moreover, Levia's fixity of purpose made the moment deadly serious, drowning out all thoughts of the masked dancer.

He rose to meet her. "What is it?"

"Outside." She turned on her heel and strode back into the snowy Westgate night.

Kalen rose immediately and followed her, heedless of Cellica's incredulous protest.

"Yondalla spare us all from crusaders." She tossed a few coins on the table and hurried behind him. "And Waukeen bless those who pay the bill."

When Cellica left the Rotten Root, the street seemed deserted. A storm brewed, causing swirling snowfall to choke Westgate's labyrinthine streets. Few risked the battered cobblestone thoroughfares of the city of thieves in inclement weather or after dark, and this was both. Kalen stood like a gray statue against the storm. Cellica saw no sign of Levia.

"Well," said Cellica. "Guess we'd better turn back to where it's warm, the drinks are plentiful, and the dancers welcoming . . ."

"There." Kalen pointed to the roof.

"Truly?" Cellica said, hesitating. "Climbing hardly seems wise."

He put out his arm.

"Oh, *Hells,* no," she said. "No. Not going to happen. Not in the slightest."

"Cele."

She sighed and climbed into his grasp. "Very well, just–aah!"

As she clung desperately, Kalen summoned the magic in his boots and leaped. Tiny blue flames lit under his feet, and the magic lifted him up to the roof as easily as if he'd taken a tiny step. Cellica cursed Levia every day for having given him those boots, and she prayed every day that he would outgrow the frightful and (worse) unfashionable things. No such luck–they seemed to grow with him, fitting better each day. Gods-damned magic.

Cellica shivered as Kalen deposited her onto the snowy rooftop, both because the wind was fiercer with no buildings for shelter and because of the harrowing experience. "Gods-damned magic."

Kalen ignored her. His attention hung on Levia, who kneeled at the edge of the tavern roof like a gargoyle against the storm. Not that Cellica would ever make the comparison aloud: there were certain things one did not say to a friend. She liked Levia, despite her militant focus on dispensing justice and devout lack of humor. The half-elf reminded Cellica of Kalen in many ways, though Cellica hoped her brother would continue to make more upbeat friends to lighten his mood. The world always felt so bleak around those two.

"What's so secret and important?" Kalen asked.

Levia's face looked like a bleached skull. "Slaves," she said. "We've received word that the Fire Knives are buying a shipment of Durpari from Var the Drowned. The men they'll put to work in some major excavation project outside the city. The women . . . well, it'll be worse."

"On a ship, then." Kalen nodded. "Who's overseeing the trade?"

"My informant says Zerix the Cleaver."

Cellica shuddered at the name. A thoroughly unsavory brute in Westgate's underworld, Zerix bore a well-earned reputation for cruelty and violence, even among the Fire Knives. To the former butcher, every enemy was an opportunity to perfect his cuts. Apparently, he never cleaned his notched kukri fully, preferring to let the blood of each victim stain its blade.

"What's more," Levia said. "I'm sure a few that catch Zerix's eye will end up in his bed–or on the slab."

"That's quite enough detail," Cellica said. "We're convinced."

Kalen nodded. "The ship arrives tonight?"

"The Bleached Bone weighed anchor just outside the harbor an hour ago. She'll put into the Vhammos private docks around deepnight per their agreement with the House of Bleth."

"Bleth must be paying them a kingly sum," Cellica mused. "Wasn't Trebor Vhammos engaged to Rigante Bleth? And then she jilted him at the altar for her paladin of Proskur? This must be a move to repay that slight." She nudged Kalen. "See? I told you gossip was valuable."

Levia nodded. "If we can thwart this deal, Bleth's alliance with Vhammos suffers and might collapse entirely." She handed Kalen a tabard with the eye-in-gauntlet symbol of the Eye emblazoned on it prominently. "Wearing Eye of Justice colors means we can claim to be enforcing Westgate's law against slavery, and no one will be able to object without looking complicit."

"Spare me the politics." Kalen shrugged into the tabard. "We don't stand for slavers or murderers. You need say nothing more." He put his hand on Levia's arm. "I am with you."

His teacher smiled broadly, and her whole body relaxed a little.

"Hrm." Cellica wondered if her clueless brother knew the effect he had on Levia. Alas. She fingered her crossbow-shaped amulet. "Can we go? It's gods-damned *freezing* up here."

Levia nodded. "Let's move."

Westgate's rooftops were too slick in the midst of the snowstorm for quick passage, so they descended to the cobblestones and raced through the drifts as

thunder rolled off the Sea of Fallen Stars. The old-blood families of Westgate called the storms the result of thrashing nightmares dreamed by the old Stormlord Talos, though priests of Gruumsh, God of Destruction, insisted their god had slain Talos and claimed his mantle. True or not, most folk cared little who heard their prayers, so long as their prayers were answered.

In Kalen's experience, death rarely proved much of a hindrance to the gods in Faerûn: the sword of a dead god sheathed at his belt gave enough evidence of that. As he gripped the handle of Vindicator, gray flames licked his gloved hand and he once again sensed the favor of the long-dead God of Guardians. Helm had first conveyed his will nearly a hundred years ago to Gedrin Thalavar, Levia's master and Kalen's inspiration. Gedrin had taken the name "Shadowbane" for this duty, and he had brought justice to the darkest corners of the world.

Kalen knew Levia expected great things of him. To her, he was Gedrin's heir, chosen by fate to wield Vindicator. And indeed, he—and no one else—could wield the sword. He was not sure whether Helm or Gedrin had done the choosing, but if Kalen could honor even a tenth of their legacy, he would consider his duty done.

They delved into the east end of Westgate as the clouds broke and the moon rose high. Around them, frost-stiffened banners painted with elegant calligraphy marked the territory of the growing Shou community. The Nine Golden Swords claimed the area around the east end, and Kalen wondered why the Fire Knives would choose to do business outside their own territory. Perhaps they meant to implicate the Swords in the slave trade, thus legitimizing a crackdown on the Shou.

Sure enough, a ship was putting in at the Vhammos dock and the watch was notably absent. This neither surprised nor troubled Kalen: since House Bleth owned the watch, they would only be more swords to defeat. Their absence meant Kalen would have less blood on his hands come morn. His hands were stained enough from all the blood he had spilled before Gedrin had saved him all those years ago in Luskan. The boy he had been still unnerved the man he had become, and every life he ended thereafter reminded him of his vicious youth.

"We should scout out the docks," Levia said. "I have no idea how many men Zerix has, or how many pirates might be on the *Bone*."

"Very well." Kalen's stomach roiled with impatience. Why was he so edgy? Instinct told him to strike fast and hard. They needed to go immediately. "Cellica, you keep watch from up there." He nodded up to the top of the warehouse and put out his arm to fly her up.

"Oh no, none of that," the halfling said. "I'll climb."

Kalen nodded. "Levia, you take the right, I'll take the left. Note blades, obstacles, exits. Find a position of strength. I'll make the first move."

Levia nodded in agreement. Though she was Kalen's teacher, she usually let him give the orders. It was as much a test of his abilities as her own preference. Levia was not a leader but a fiercely loyal right hand. So she had been to Gedrin, and so she had chosen to be for Kalen.

They broke ranks and headed into the building. Once he was alone, Kalen fell into the comfortable slinking step he'd favored in Luskan to case the warehouse. His days as a thief might be long behind him, but the skills had not gone away. He knew how to size up a mark, be it a building or a victim, and he had a knack for finding a subtle entrance or a quick exit. His shady background had served him well under Levia's tutelage, though she'd taught him not to kill needlessly. That had been a difficult lesson.

He eschewed the obvious side door, at which two Vhammos guard stood watch, and instead made his way down toward the dock. The place swarmed with Vhammos sentries, though Kalen couldn't make out any Fire Knives. It struck him as odd that Vhammos would do all the work, but then, the Knives would hardly want to risk being seen before the exchange was made. He waited.

After a moment, Kalen heard a deep voice call out, "Aid, you oafs!"

The men departed, hurrying to help unload the "cargo." From his vantage point, Kalen could see the *Bleached Bone* with its peeling white hull and gray sails. It was a pirate schooner, no mistake. He watched as men in the livery of Vhammos soldiers escorted half a dozen cloaked and huddled figures onto the dock. The boards creaked under their feet, and Kalen could hear one among them weeping quietly. The popping of his knuckles told him he'd been clutching his fists too tightly, though he hadn't realized it because of his curse.

Kalen climbed along under the warehouse until he found floorboards rotted away by the constant waves, then shimmied his way up. Dust coated his face and cloak, but getting dirty was of no consequence compared to saving a dozen folk from slavery. On the edges of the main hall, he scuttled, like the Dead Rats he had run with in Luskan, to a hiding spot behind a shipping container that stank of moldering cloth and the salt of the sea.

A group of men stood in the hall, ostensibly inspecting the new arrivals, who cowered in a knot under their lewd scrutiny. So few had come off the boat it forced Kalen to wonder how many had perished in the journey from Durpar. Did the sailors simply throw the bodies overboard, heaping yet another insult on the men and women they'd stolen from their lives and families? Kalen hungered to crush House Vhammos and the Fire Knives, both at once if possible. He grasped Vindicator's handle, and gray flames surged around his hand.

What was taking Levia so long to get into position? He needed to move—to end this injustice before it went further.

Zerix appeared, distinctive among his fellows for the network of scars he bore on his bare chest and shoulders. Kalen had given him one of those scars personally, during one particularly dark night on the Spur. No doubt Zerix would remember him. The ugly man swaggered up to the first slave and sent him reeling to the ground with a backhand. He stepped over the man and seized a second slave—this one a woman—by the throat. He inspected her face as she struggled to free herself.

He could not wait any longer.

He heard a single tap from far above. It was not loud enough to distract the pirates, but he'd known to listen for it, seeing as he'd been listening for it. Cellica peered in the window, her eyes locked on him—and on Vindicator's flames. Of course she knew what he was thinking, and she shook her head violently to dissuade him. Too late.

Kalen slipped the sheathed Vindicator from his belt and held it before him like a staff as he strode from his hiding place. "Blades down and halt, in the name of the Eye of Justice," he intoned.

The nearest man—a Fire Knives assassin judging by his sneer and carriage—drew a blade, but Kalen brought his sheathed sword down hard across his hand, then up to slam into his jaw. The man collapsed without a sound.

Gray flames leaking from Vindicator's hilt, Kalen took in the rest of the assembled criminals, whose faces said they recognized him immediately. "Surrender now," he said.

The Vhammos dockworkers looked close to panic, and the Fire Knives themselves looked anxious. The power of Vindicator was well known in Westgate, and Kalen had won a reputation among those who dwelled in the shady underbelly of the city. Something was not right, though. Perhaps it was the swagger in Zerix's step that said he was not the least bit intimidated, or the way he smiled, drawing his split lips back over yellow teeth.

"He's the one," he said. "Take him now."

Blades scraped free of scabbards. Half a dozen men he had not seen at first leaned out from behind crates or barrels, crossbows cocked and ready in their hands. One of the men drew a wand from under his cloak and incanted the beginnings of a spell. Worst of all, the seemingly helpless "slaves" threw off their tattered cloaks to reveal maces and swords as well as well-oiled brigandine armor. It was, he realized, the standard equipment for knights of the Eye of Justice.

Betrayed.

Kalen shut his eyes and ripped Vindicator from its scabbard with a flare of light that made his world go red for a heartbeat. At the same time, he leaned into a blind charge toward Zerix, sword in one hand and empty scabbard in the other. Startled cries told him he'd caught most of his dazzled attackers by surprise, and crossbow quarrels hissed aimlessly past him. He felt a dull impact as one lucky shot caught him in his sword arm, but his spellscar kept the pain silent. Fire burst just behind him. At least he'd blinded the wizard, thank Helm!

He opened his eyes just in time to see Zerix charging to meet him, blades ready. The old butcher hadn't been fooled and must have averted his eyes to avoid the flash. They met with a clash of steel.

"End of the path, crusader," Zerix said, his breath rank with his rotting teeth.

Zerix leaned his superior weight against Kalen to throw him back. Most of the thugs of Luskan would have taken that as a challenge, but Kalen had been a spindly child, always smaller than his opponents. He'd put on considerable muscle in the years since, but he still knew better than to grapple stronger men. He fell back and let Zerix overbalance, then brought Vindicator scything around to hack at his shoulder. It should have been a clean blow, but the quarrel in Kalen's sword arm strained against his body and weakened his slash.

Zerix chortled and knocked the attack aside with his cleavers. He twisted Vindicator into the floor and countered with a vicious backhand with his other blade. Kalen ducked and slammed his empty scabbard into the side of the man's knee, which made a cracking noise and wrenched a howl of pain and anger from Zerix. With surprising speed and strength, the butcher slammed his scarred head into Kalen's chest, which sent him staggering back. Dizzily, Kalen saw other swords angling toward him and swept Vindicator around to knock them aside.

"Levia," he said. "Now would be a fine moment."

The ground shook, and several of his attackers fell to one knee or hit the floor entirely. Levia appeared, a warrior's prayer to the Threefold God on her lips. Crossbow quarrels stabbed toward her, but they glanced off her shield and the golden aura of her faith. She raised her glowing mace high and brought it down on an enemy's hastily raised defense. His sword and arm both shattered under the divine-infused blow, and the man dropped senseless to the floor.

"Halt and down steel in the name of the Threefold God!" Levia cried.

Her appearance and challenge had an immediate effect. The few Vhammos dockhands who had remained, clubs or daggers at the ready, turned and fled through the doors and even the windows of the dock house. The Fire Knives backed away, wary of her power, but one of the fake slaves ran to engage her. His mace smashed into Levia's shield, knocking her off balance. She ceased being a god's vengeful servant and became a mortal woman, powerful but fallible.

Four fake slaves surrounded Kalen, glaring at him with silent, deadly determination. As they slowly closed the circle, they held their swords aloft, ready for his movement. They did not look the least bit afraid of him, which was bad. One twisted his scabbard out of his hand, and he had to let it go or be run through. He fell back and two enemies struck at once

from opposite directions. Even their tactics had been designed to defeat his style.

A crossbow quarrel took one of Kalen's attackers in the shoulder. The impostor slave faltered and missed his strike.

Kalen seized the opportunity. He focused on the opposite attacker, parried, and followed the momentum of the attack to crash into the injured man. Taken by surprise, the man went down beneath the rush, and Kalen leaped off him to catch a low-hanging rafter. One-handed, he swung up and perched on the crossbeam. Below him, Zerix cursed his injured leg. Kalen leaped off, bringing his second hand up to clasp Vindicator's pommel. Holding his sword in both hands, Kalen plunged down at Zerix, who could not hope to block in his surprise.

Then Kalen's flight was interrupted when a glowing red hand the size of a horse wrapped around him, reversed his momentum, and slammed him back into the rafter, and then into the floor. The wizard, his greasy mustache groomed in the Inner Sea style, grinned at Kalen and raised his clenched fist. The hand rose in accordance, bearing Kalen aloft, and began to squeeze.

"Helm burn all wizards," Kalen said through clenched teeth. He couldn't feel the pain of the grasping hand, but it cut off his air and held his limbs immobile. The spell didn't seem powerful enough to kill, but it would not have to. Zerix stalked toward him, blades ready.

A crossbow quarrel hissed down from the ceiling and took the wizard between the neck and shoulder. The force knocked him gagging to the ground, and his arm flailed toward the ceiling. As it went, so did the conjured hand with its prisoner, smashing Zerix aside like an insect, then shooting up toward the skylight, where Kalen saw Cellica loading another quarrel into her crossbow. The halfling's eyes widened and she mouthed a curse as Kalen flew at her.

Metal groaned and glass shattered as the hand burst upward into the night. Cellica had started to leap away, but the force launched her up in a crazy spin. The hand flailed back and forth, jerked straight, then faded out of existence, leaving Kalen and Cellica hanging for a weightless heartbeat among a tempest of broken glass. Then they plummeted back into the dock house. The halfling cried out in surprise and fear.

Kalen released Vindicator to tumble freely, twisted in the air, and pulled Cellica into his embrace. Glass cut his cloak and limbs, but it would not hurt her. He swore it.

They slammed down with splintering force into a rafter, which caved in and sent a clenching shudder through Kalen's spine. He braced himself tight around Cellica, protecting her with his numb body. He watched as Vindicator spun end over end and stuck into the floor, cutting into the greasy floorboards like an arrow.

The rafter gave way with a ragged groan, and Kalen fell the last ten feet to the floor. Cellica rolled away. Kalen lay choking on dust, the splintered-off remains of the rafter pinning his leg to the floor.

Kalen blinked and wiped grime from his face. At least he could still move his body. "Cellica?" he asked. "Cele?"

"Present," the halfling said, followed by a cough. She lay on the floor, dazed but otherwise unhurt. "One thing you are, Kalen—you're never boring."

"Another thing he is," said Zerix, "is dead."

The big butcher stood over them, heaving and red in the face. He hardly looked human in the moonlight streaming down from above. He'd taken a hit from the conjured hand to one cheek, leaving an ugly bruise, and the falling glass had torn him open half a dozen times from face to belly. His cleavers glinted hungrily.

"*Put them down*," Cellica said.

Kalen heard the compulsion in her voice. Since he had met Cellica stumbling out of a cultist's crypt, he'd known about her special magic. When she spoke, folk tended to listen, and when she mustered her focus, they often did as she said.

In the distraction, Kalen shoved the broken rafter off his twisted leg. He couldn't feel it beyond a distant gnawing.

"Don't scare me . . . little tramp." Zerix stepped toward them. "Cut you up . . . I will . . ."

"Wouldn't that be better?" Cellica gestured to Vindicator. "*Pick it up*."

Kalen bit his tongue and watched gray flame lick up Vindicator's blade. Zerix eyed it too, and Kalen could see the mad hunger in his eyes.

"Sorry," Cellica said.

"Why?" The butcher reached out his blood-slick hand for Vindicator.

As his fingers touched the hilt, torrents of gray flame sprang into life around the sword. Zerix stared at the sword, horrified, as his skin sizzled and seared to the steel, and gray flames spread across his hand. His mouth worked, mouthing partial words of shock.

"That's why," Cellica said.

Finally, Zerix managed to give voice to his pain, which ripped out of him as a roar of agony. He pulled at his stuck hand, and it took three tries before he ripped it away from Vindicator's hilt. Blood and seared flesh trailed in his wake as he ran screaming from the dock house. Their leader defeated, the rest of the Fire Knives retreated as well, no doubt thankful not to have to face Levia and her divine powers.

In the moment of peace, Kalen climbed to his feet despite his protesting leg. He'd likely sprained or broken it, but he felt no pain. "Harsh, Cele," he said. "You . . ."

Cellica's eyes widened and she gasped.

Something struck Kalen, and he looked down in time to see a blade sticking out of his belly. One of the Justice Knights disguised as slaves had stabbed him

from behind. "Traitors," the knight hissed in Kalen's ear.

"Kalen!" Levia fended off two more of the false slaves. One of them slashed the mace from her hand, but she managed to bash that attacker away with her shield.

Cellica drew a bead with her crossbow, but she couldn't discharge her quarrel without the risk of hitting Kalen.

Kalen twisted—hardly aware of the blade through his body—and slammed his fist into his attacker's face. The knight staggered back, pulling his sword free, but he stayed on his guard. Cellica fired her crossbow, but the man dodged and came in with a low attack. Kalen raised his bare hand, determined to block a killing thrust, even at the cost of his limb.

Then Levia was there, a flaming sword in her hands: Vindicator. Gray flames swept through the air and cut the knight's sword in half. The man fell back, his eyes wide and terrified, and Levia stood between him and Kalen. "Stay back," she said, "or I'll kill all of you."

The knights fell back, obvious terror on their faces.

Kalen stared at Vindicator, and how Levia held it without burning her hands. He had thought he was the only one who could touch it, but perhaps Helm had chosen more than one champion?

"Levia," Kalen said.

She looked at him over her shoulder, then seemed to realize what was happening and winced as though in pain. She handed him back Vindicator, looking pleased to be parted from it. At the same time, healing magic passed between them as her hand touched his, closing the wound he could barely feel. Together, they faced the three remaining knights.

They looked none too confident. The knight who had attacked Kalen shoved the others forward and ran.

"*Stop!*" Cellica commanded, and the man jerked to a halt.

The others looked at each other, then turned toward Cellica with cries of challenge.

Levia blasted one with a jet of white light, and the knight shrieked and fell to her knees, coughing radiance. She screamed and plucked at her eyes, which had turned white and scabbed when the light had struck her face.

The other man rushed Kalen, his sword chopping down, but Kalen easily parried his blow. Rage grinding his teeth, he reversed Vindicator and smashed the man in the side of the head with the pommel. The false slave's helmet caved in, and he fell jerking to the ground.

"Kalen!" Levia cried, shock on her face. "There was no need to kill him."

"Couldn't be helped," he lied.

Levia shook her head, then dealt the blinded woman a blow to the back of the head that put her down, unconscious.

Kalen crossed to the paralyzed man, in his brigandine armor and leather mask, and shoved him to his knees. "This one can speak."

Cellica and Levia strode forward, and Kalen wrenched off the man's mask. Cellica gasped and Levia went pale. They both recognized Trawn, a Knight of the Eye in service to Lord Sephalus of the Vigilant Seers. The man hardly kept good care of his soldiers, though, so Trawn was as likely to act on his own initiative as upon his superior's orders. If he had come with other members of the order, though . . .

Cellica hurried to unmask the other fallen slaves. The one Kalen had killed with the pommel of Vindicator was a cutter named Dalor, a sharp blade out of the north. Levia's own victim was Alys, a con artist converted to the Eye, who lay unconscious and moaning in the wake of the light that had seared her eyes.

"Tell us who set this trap," Kalen demanded of Trawn. "Who gave the order?"

The would-be assassin spat at him.

Kalen wiped spittle from his face, then dealt the man a right cross to the cheek. "Who is the traitor? Who ordered this? Was it Haran? Rsalya? Which of our enemies sent you?"

Head lolling, the Justice Knight coughed and spat blood. "Whelp," he said. "I may have failed, but others will come. We will hound you from this city. We will never stop until—"

Cellica leaped atop him and drove one foot into his groin even as she grasped his face. She drove her thumbs into his eyes, and the man answered with a gargling scream.

"That's enough, Cele." Kalen pulled her off their hysterical captive.

"He said he would never stop," Cellica said. "Of course we have to kill him."

Levia's face was gray as ash, but she nodded in agreement.

Everything that Kalen had been before Westgate sided with his adopted sister, but he made a conscious effort to restrain his rage. "No. He is a zealot, yes, but he's more useful alive. We must find which of the Watchers wants us dead, or—gods forbid—which of the Vigilant Seers. We can go to Uthias, who will root out the traitor. The Eye must not fall into schism."

Their captive uttered a guttural, broken sound Kalen could not at first identify. When they all fell silent, he could hear it better. Laughter.

"Foolish boy," Trawn said. "You have no idea how deeply rooted your enemies are. You were doomed the day you stepped through the gate seven years ago. You just can't see it—but you will. It is your doom, after all."

"Give me a name," Kalen said. "Give me a name, so Uthias knows who to banish."

"Who do you imagine gave the order?" Trawn chuckled.

"No," Levia said. "That can't be. The Lord Seer would never—"

Trawn spat blood at Levia. "The Eye and the Fire Knives have been allies since long before even you came to Westgate, Sister Horseface. And as for you," he said, turning to Kalen, "Uthias Darkwell has wanted you dead and buried from that first day you challenged him."

At that accusation, Kalen and Cellica both stared, dumbfounded as his words weighed down upon them. Levia breathed faster and faster, her eyes fixed on Trawn's blood-smeared face. She trembled, her hands curling into fists then flattening against her thighs, over and over.

Finally, Kalen broke his silence. "Why?"

"Because you are a threat, scion of Shadowbane," Trawn said. "You have no allies in the Eye, only enemies. Uthias allowed you to peck at the dirt for a time, but the sun will set soon, and it will be time to feast. Your neck is the first upon the block. Her—" He grinned at Cellica. "I get to do what I want with your little goblin of a sister." Trawn drooled blood. "I've never had a halfling before. Can't promise I'll be gentle."

"Can I kill him now?" Cellica looked ill.

Kalen was finding it increasingly hard to justify restraining her. He just couldn't believe it. He knew he had enemies among the Eye, but the High Seer himself? The Eye had declared itself neutral with regard to the Fire Knives, but could they really be *allies*? House Bleth was a pack of assassins and traitors. How could the Eye have fallen so far, and how had he been blind to it?

The raised voices of watchmen out in the street drew his attention, and the muddy lights of torches clustered outside the bleary windows of the warehouse. Being caught here would be just as bad as anything Trawn had intended, particularly if the traitors in the Eye had sway in the Westgate watch. "We're running out of time," Kalen said.

"We can't take him with us," Cellica said. "Not if those guards are out there."

Trawn sneered at Kalen.

"One last question," Levia wove gray fire around her mace. "Were you to kill me?"

Trawn looked at her, as though he'd totally forgotten her existence. "Uthias didn't mention you. Waste of steel."

Levia stepped forward and brought her flaming mace down on Trawn's head with a wet *thunk*. Bone cracked and he slumped down, his head caved in like a rotted melon. Smoke rose from his seared flesh. Cellica gasped, but Kalen only nodded. It had to be done.

"We need to go," Levia said. "Now."

They got back to a safe house down on the Harbor Loop, one of many bolt-holes Kalen kept separate from the Eye of Justice. It was a rented room over a festhall called the Rosebud, which boasted rooftop access that went unwatched thanks to sufficient coin flowing into the madam's hands. He couldn't guarantee the Eye didn't know about it, however—he had no idea how deep the conspiracy went. If Uthias himself were indeed behind it, the Eye might descend on the Rosebud within the hour.

"Cele," Kalen said. "Settle up with the owner. Say your good-byes. We need to move."

"Right." The halfling had not yet returned her crossbow to her amulet, so tense had been their flight, but she did so now. She even paused to fix her snow-mussed hair so as to make a good impression. She had intimate friends among the celebrants, after all.

Kalen went into his room, limping a little from his injured leg, and began packing.

Levia lingered in the doorway, a confused look on her face. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving," Kalen said. "Westgate, the Dragon Coast . . . all of it."

"Leaving?" Levia looked stunned. "I don't understand. Where will you go?"

"Cormyr, perhaps, or Sembia, to fight the Shades. I might go as far as Waterdeep." Kalen folded his spare leathers and fitted them carefully in his pack. He laid four sheathed knives atop his clothes. "Wherever my path might lead, I have to go. I cannot do my duty if I stay here. Uthias has seen to that. The Eye is beyond my power to fix."

"And what of me?" Levia asked. "I have given thirty years of my life to the Eye of Justice—to Westgate. I cannot simply abandon them."

"That is why you aren't coming."

Levia's jaw dropped. "What?"

"The knights succeeded in their task, at least in part," Kalen said. "Cellica and I have fled the city. You sided with Darkwell, seeing the future of the Eye as he does."

"You think that will fool anyone?" Levia asked. "They know how much I . . . they know of my love for Gedrin and for you."

"If anyone can convince them, it's you. You are by far the best liar I have ever met."

"And you are by far the worst," Levia said. "But say on. What is the purpose of this lie?"

"You spare yourself, for a first," Kalen said, continuing to pack. "If Darkwell wants me dead, he will not hesitate to slay you as my ally. But if I betrayed you and we fought, you can gain Darkwell's confidence, and you can retain your place in the order. Perhaps he will even reward you for turning upon his enemy. But I promise you this, you will be disappointed. The Eye will never be what you would wish."

Most of his armor was packed. He laid his hand on the last piece, propped against his pack on the table: his leather-and-steel helm, which hid his entire face when closed.

"That—that won't—" Levia clutched her hands in white-knuckled fists. "That won't serve. No one will

be fooled. You heard Trawn—the Eye will never stop hunting you."

Kalen nodded. "Then tell them I am dead. Tell them Cellica and I both lie dead, killed under your mace when we turned on you."

"What? No." Levia looked horrified. "Say I murdered you? No one will believe it."

"Levia." Kalen seized her arms in his strong hands, hard enough to bruise by her expression. He loosened his grasp, not knowing his own strength. "Levia, you must make them believe it. You know this is the only way."

"Kalen, I—" She turned her face up to his. "What of this?" She touched Vindicator's gauntlet-marked hilt on the table. Gray flame rose around her fingers, and she pulled away as though burned. Its activities earlier notwithstanding, it would brook no other wielder than Kalen. "The sword has chosen you. You cannot leave it here."

"Tell them that when you tried to claim Vindicator, the sword disappeared," Kalen said. "You do not know where it went, but you hope it found a worthy wielder."

Levia smiled wanly. "You must really hate me," she said. "Do you have any idea how Haran will *bristle* at the thought that neither he nor anyone else in the Eye is worthy?"

"Let them think what they will." Kalen smiled grimly. "The Eye of Justice does not blink. He does not turn his gaze. 'Shadow and darkness must be pursued in every form, through'—"

" 'Through every street, down every path, no matter how dark, until it is wiped from the world,' " Levia finished. "Gedrin taught me too, Kalen. Why are his words any stronger for you than for me? For any of us?"

"The work of Gedrin Shadowbane must go on," Kalen said. "And it cannot continue here in Westgate. Not yet."

"Not yet." Levia drew in a deep breath. "So . . . you'll return? You'll come back to me?"

Kalen considered. "Perhaps. When I—"

She reached up and kissed him. At first, Kalen didn't even know what she was doing, and then he was too surprised to protest or stop her. Finally, after his heart thudded four times, he managed to push her back. "Levia, what—?"

"Oh." In an instant, her jubilant expression fell into devastation. "I just—I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't have—"

"No," he said. "No, you shouldn't have."

They stood silently in the room, listening to the wind howl outside the window. Then Kalen turned away, and without another word, crossed to the door to go.

"Kalen, wait!" Levia said.

"Kalen Dren is dead," he said. "I am Shadowbane."

Then he was gone.

WANT TO READ MORE?

Check out the continuing adventures of Kalen Dren:

"The Last Legend of Gedrin Shadowbane" (prequel origin webstory)

Book 1: *Downshadow*

"Chosen of the Sword" (free e-novella)

Book 2: *Shadowbane*

Book 3: *Shadowbane: Eye of Justice*

About the Author

Erik Scott de Bie is a fiction writer best known for his work in the Forgotten Realms® campaign setting, including the third novel in the Shadowbane series, *Shadowbane: Eye of Justice*. "Heir of Shadowbane" is a prequel set before the first Shadowbane novel, *Downshadow*. His work has also appeared in numerous anthologies, including *Realms of the Elves*, *Realms of the Dead*, *When the Hero Comes Home* (and its sequel, *When the Villain Comes Home*), and *Human for a Day*. He moonlights as a game designer, contributing to the *Shadowfell: Gloomwrought and Beyond*™ boxed set and the *Neverwinter*™ *Campaign Setting*, as well as the tie-in D&D Encounters season, "The Lost Crown of Neverwinter," and numerous DDI articles.

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History Check: The Many Deaths of Manshoon

By Brian Cortijo

Illustration by Chris Seaman

Welcome to the latest installment in a series that delves into the storied history of the iconic characters and events in the Dungeons & Dragons® game. Each article provides insights into a different hero, villain, organization, or event, sifting through the varied tales of D&D® history to offer knowledge both familiar and new. Throughout the text, sidebars single out what an adventurer might know about the topic at hand based on a successful skill check.

This installment delves into the history of one of the first and worst (or best, depending on your perspective) villains of the Forgotten Realms® setting: Manshoon of the Zhentarim, his many clones, and their varied demises.

On Manshoon

"An interesting query, indeed. Sit, traveler, and listen: I shall impart the knowledge you seek, and perhaps in time your own request shall become part of the narrative. Although I dare not speculate on

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the intended use of this knowledge, considering the nature of your inquiry. . . .

"Manshoon. Master of the Zhentarim. High Lord of Zhentil Keep. Powerful archmage and schemer without equal.

"Born in 1229 DR in Zhentil Keep, Manshoon became embroiled in the politics of his home from an early age. His father, Harlshoon, was First Lord of the city. Manshoon spent a good portion of his youth in the company of his brother, Asmuth, along with Chess, the son of Harlshoon's chief rival, Calkontor. All three boys were sent on missions to prove themselves as worthy princes of Zhentil Keep.

"Calkontor, jealous of Harlshoon's position, poisoned the First Lord and was killed in the attempt. Their seats on the city's council were usurped by a Banite priest named Ulsan Baneservant and a wizard called Telion Greencloak. After learning of their fathers' deaths, the three scions vowed to reclaim their seats on the council. But two sons could not sit in the same seat. Following a battle with the Harpers in the Dalelands that left Asmuth blinded, Manshoon disposed of his brother by arranging his fall off a narrow bridge.

THE SCRIBES OF CANDLEKEEP

The narrator of this "History Check" is a junior scribe in the great library of Candlekeep, a secluded outpost of knowledge on the shore of the Sea of Swords. A repository of all recorded learning in Faerûn (and, where possible, beyond the continent), Candlekeep contains records of the rarest and most dangerous sorts—including information on prohibited spells, religious heresies, and the lost plans of long-dead traitors.

"When he returned to the city in 1260 DR, Manshoon and Chess found Lord Greencloak already dead, and Lord Baneservant consumed with eliminating the two young heirs. Chess feigned loyalty to the priest and then betrayed him, and the two lord-princes—together with a young Banite priest named Fzoul Chembryl—slew Ulsan and claimed their fathers' seats on the council of Zhentil Keep. Then they used their influence to foster the rise of the opportunistic Chembryl through the ranks of the clergy of Bane.

"As a lord of Zhentil Keep, Manshoon was empowered as never before. Nevertheless, he felt exposed. Eschewing the usual roads of conquest, he forged the secret Black Network of the Zhentarim. Together with Fzoul and a number of Banite priests who had the foresight to follow him, this cadre of mages, priests, and spies set about seeking control of Zhentil Keep, the Moonsea, and—through subterfuge, deceit, and sabotage—all of Faerûn.

"Even with the Zhentarim to protect him and expand his interests, Manshoon's paranoia drove him to develop the secret of stasis clone magic, an immensely potent ritual he shared with no one. Through its use, Manshoon could prepare a duplicate body that would remain hidden and well protected until such time as he met a violent death. Then, Manshoon would rise anew, with his memories intact and knowledge of his killers. He would gather his magic, reclaim his spellbook, and wreak horrible vengeance.

"Over long years, the Zhentarim became the main opposition of the Harpers, corrupting merchants and minor nobles across the greater Heartlands and becoming the prime force in the Moonsea. Turning his gaze westward, the Lord of Zhentil Keep took control of Shadowdale through his puppet, Jyordhan, and of Daggerdale through another agent, Malyk.

"Beginning in the middle of the last century, Manshoon's stratagems began to unravel. Khelben Arunsun slew Jyordhan in 1345 DR; Malyk was killed in 1353 DR by Randal Morn and his supporters. The death of Bane at the hands of the paladin-god Torm in 1358 DR destabilized the Zhentarim further, eroding much of the tyrannical order that the Banite priests depended on for guidance. For a time, Manshoon's ally served the god of strife, Cyric, but then turned to Iyachtu Xvim, Bane's son.

"And then Manshoon's so-called allies struck."

HISTORY CHECK

A character knows of the existence of Manshoon and his history as founder of the Zhentarim with a DC 10 History check. A DC 20 check reveals the public history of the council of Zhentil Keep. A DC 35 check reveals all of the above, as well as detailing Manshoon's youth as a lordling in Zhentil Keep.

The Manshoon Wars

"Manshoon survived for decades as the undisputed master of the Zhentarim. All of that changed in 1370 DR, when Fzoul Chembryl, High Imperceptor of Bane, allied with Lord Orgauth of Zhentil Keep and slew the powerful wizard in the Citadel of the Raven. Because they were expecting just one clone to awaken, the conspirators were surprised to see the ensuing rampage of no fewer than six newly awakened Manshoon clones. These mages first attempted to reclaim Manshoon's master spellbook, only then becoming aware of the existence of the others. Each clone believed himself to be the true archwizard.

"What ensued was a series of bloody battles through Zhentil Keep and the Citadel of the Raven, and later near caches of magic squirreled away by Manshoon for reclamation by one of his activated clones. Because their cloning magic forced them to seek the deaths of all 'false' copies of themselves (in this case, any other Manshoon clone of which they became aware), the Manshoons were distracted from their ultimate goals of vengeance against Fzoul and Orgauth and mastery of the Zhentarim.

"In all, reports account for some twelve Manshoon clones that tore each other apart in Zhentil Keep, the Citadel of the Raven, and Darkhold. Reports of another dozen other Manshoon battles elsewhere remain unconfirmed."

The Clones' Madness

"It bears mentioning that these stasis clones were not duplicates of a bloodthirsty, murderous person. Manshoon was as patient and calculating as anyone can be.

"When in proximity to another clone, each Manshoon developed both a paranoid attention to detail and a maniacal need to seek out and slay his fellows until only one true Manshoon remained. This madness began at an approximate distance of five miles, and it grew stronger and more urgent the closer or more numerous the clones were.

"Clones of Manshoon that learned of the condition before being afflicted by it sought to protect themselves with magic or by secluding themselves far from where another Manshoon might go. But how can you hide from yourself?

"It is presumed that most failed and were killed off by the other Manshoons. There also remains the disturbing possibility that not all of Manshoon's clones awoke during the Manshoon Wars, or that one or more of the clones created additional stasis clones."

Deaths beyond the Zhentarim

"Manshoon maintained a number of clones outside of the known stasis chambers—indeed, well beyond the reach of any of his comrades in the Black Network. These clones awoke along with the others. The distance they maintained from one another meant they were free for some time from the slaying compulsion that gripped most of the other clones. The following accounts of the deaths of several of them have been gathered from various sources.

"One clone awoke in central Cormyr and immediately sought to subdue the nation's Royal Magician, Vangerdahast. Having been humbled in the past by an encounter with Manshoon, the mage royal took great glee in exploiting the wards of the Royal Palace to kill this Manshoon. He knew full well of the reports of Manshoons across the Heartlands, and was aware that this was likely only a copy of the original, but this fact did not diminish his satisfaction.

"Two clones arose in the Dalelands, and both independently decided to pay a visit to Elminster of Shadowdale. They arrived on the same day in late Tarsakh, their bloodlust growing as they got closer and closer to one another and their destination. By the time the Old Mage made it to his front door, he found only two piles of smoldering ash on his stoop, the smell of fresh ozone filling his nostrils. He learned from the shade of Sylûne what had occurred.

"Two more clones met each other on the road from Darkhold toward Baldur's Gate and flew into simultaneous murderous rages, hurling spells at one another and destroying a hamlet of innocents in the process. When the Hellriders of Elturel arrived to investigate the destruction, they found only the surviving clone, attempting to flee the devastation by means of his sole remaining flight spell. The riders struck him down with arrows and burned the body.

"Another clone of Manshoon awoke in, of all places, the heart of Blackstaff Tower, with Khelben standing over him. When the clone attempted to strike the Blackstaff down with spells, he was torn apart by the archmage's defenses. Following a brief but thorough magical investigation of the remains, Khelben transmitted an eldritch witness of the events to his fellow Chosen of Mystra, to the library at Candlekeep, and to Zhentil Keep, as a strict and unquestioned warning.

"Lastly, there was the clone who witnessed the death of the Manshoon that challenged Vangerdahast. He waited for more than a year, until the royal magician retired. Thinking that Vangerdahast's successor, Caladnei, would be easier prey—and, like every other Manshoon, holding Cormyr as a shining prize—he struck. Caladnei warded off this Manshoon long enough to draw him into an area of dead magic and used her superior martial abilities to cut his throat with her ready sword.

"Those clones that mastered their compulsions, or were fortunate enough to awaken far from their compatriots, eventually sought refuge by means of trading spells, magic items, or knowledge of caches of wealth. Most did so without revealing their true identities—for few others would willingly aid Manshoon of the Zhentarim—but no fewer than nine clones found sanctuary with powerful mages across the continent, including the Simbul of Aglarond, Larloch the Lich-King, and Halaster Blackcloak of Undermountain.

"The Manshoon that was sheltered by the Simbul is believed to have died just before the return of Manshoon to Zhentil Keep, when he attempted to subvert her power and slay the daughter of Mystra. The Simbul and 'Manshoon' disappeared, and only the Witch-Queen of Aglarond returned.

"The Manshoon who was taken in by Larloch was the lich's eager apprentice for a time, but attempted to flee his new master rather than embrace the undeath that Larloch planned for him. He was slain, and then

reanimated as a mindless undead of some sort, his flesh continually preserved as a stark warning to any who would defy the Lich-King. This report comes from emissaries of Larloch himself, and as such is accepted as Oghma's truth by the Great Readers of Candlekeep."

HISTORY CHECK

A character knows about the general history of the Manshoon Wars—that the wizard's clones raged across half a continent—with a DC 15 History check. A DC 20 Arcana check reveals the details of the cloning madness that led to the Manshoon Wars. A DC 20 History check reveals information on a given sighting of one of Manshoon's clones, while a successful DC 30 check discloses specifics on the account, possibly including names of eyewitnesses, or the gory details of the betrayal that spawned the many clones.

The Three that Lived

"At the end of the Manshoon Wars, it is believed that only three of the original clones remained: one that had taken refuge with the mad wizard Halaster of Undermountain, a second that resumed his position among the Zhentarim, and a third that awoke among the Night Masks of Westgate."

Manshoon of Undermountain

"Over the course of months, one of Manshoon's clones made his way across Faerûn and into Undermountain. Once there, he offered himself as a willing pupil and servant to the mad mage Halaster, who had only just regained a sliver of his sanity. He brought with him scrolls of spells he had developed or discovered, and which he thought Halaster might be interested in learning.

"On his arrival, Manshoon presented these gifts to Halaster, who burned the scrolls and refused the clone entry into Undermountain. Undeterred, and with no other option, Manshoon remained, until finally the elder mage granted him permission to stay.

"No records exist of the magic this Manshoon learned from Halaster, but reports suggest that the Manshoon of Undermountain sought out the shattered remnants of Halaster's mind, hoping to rule the place in the mage's wake, only to be torn apart himself—perhaps from the blue fire that laid waste to the world and changed the face of Toril, or perhaps at the hands of sharn dwelling deep inside the dungeon."

Manshoon of the Zhentarim

"By Shieldmeet in 1372 DR, Manshoon had reclaimed his place among the Zhentarim. He was a quieter, humbler man, willing to take direction from Fzoul as he pursued his own schemes. This Manshoon had little interest in ruling Zhentil Keep or the Black Network directly, preferring to work more subtly on private projects and tasks that would strengthen his organization and his magic.

"To all eyes, this was the 'true' Manshoon: powerful, cold, calculating, and ruthless. He spent more and more time with his spellbooks, seeking ways to perfect the stasis clone magic that had ultimately failed him two years before. He also, it is said, began studying means of transferring his essence into unawakened clones or living targets over which he had placed magical compulsions, so that he could guard against ever having to endure another death.

"Some whispered or wrote (before their sudden, mysterious deaths) that this Manshoon had discovered a way of performing such magic on the beholders he had in his thrall. It is unknown whether he succeeded—only that the Zhents around him were terrified of the prospect of a many-eyed Manshoon suddenly appearing and disintegrating them with a glance.

"Manshoon of the Zhentarim was slain when Netheril destroyed Zhentil Keep."

Orbakh

"Almost immediately following the death of Manshoon at the hands of Fzoul, one of his clones awoke in Westgate. Unlike the others, this one was not consumed with an undeniable need to seek out and slay his fellows. Instead, he was overwhelmed by another craving: a need for blood. The Night King, Orlak, had found the stasis clone in the catacombs of the city and forcibly turned him into a vampire, then awaited the day when the curious being would awake.

"It took little time for this clone to ascertain the weaknesses of his master, overcome him in battle, and claim his regalia and mantle as leader of the Night Masks of Westgate. Calling himself Orlak II, and later Orbakh, he set about turning the Night Masks into a dark, undead reflection of the Zhentarim he once ruled, subduing the underworld of the city and spreading his tendrils outward.

"Some time after the death of the 'true' Manshoon who had reclaimed his position in Zhentil Keep, Orbakh grew tired of playing a minor lord to petty thieves. He abandoned Westgate and his schemes there, weathered the Spellplague, and eventually found his way back to the Black Network, where he is in the process of regathering the reins of power he had so masterfully manipulated in his youth.

"So relates Asgir Lefrenn, Underscribe of Candlekeep."

HISTORY CHECK

A character knows general information about the fate of three remaining Manshoons with a DC 15 History check. With a successful DC 25 History check, a character knows of a recorded account of the destruction of one of the clones. A DC 40 History check or Streetwise check reveals information about a rumored sighting of a surviving Manshoon clone other than the three described here.

Plot Hooks

Below are some ideas for DMs who want to include Manshoon or one of his clones in their campaigns. DMs can also find inspiration in the *Forgotten Realms® Campaign Guide*, and a glimpse at the surviving clone in the novels *Elminster Must Die*, *Bury Elminster Deep*, and *Elminster Enraged*.

- Manshoon has numerous caches across Faerûn, containing magic items, spellbooks, notes, gems, and coin. Many of these were plundered during the Manshoon Wars and the years that followed them, but some still remain, awaiting the day when someone stumbles over the riches they contain.
- Although the vampiric Manshoon has established himself as a sole entity and the rightful inheritor of the name, any of his forebear's clones could have recorded and attempted to perfect the stasis clone magic that the original Manshoon used to prolong his life and protect himself from violent death. Rumors have been heard for years that a copy of his ritual had been hidden somewhere north of the Moonsea, but no one has yet discovered its location.
- A formidable, insane wizard has emerged in the Sword Coast north, destroying ancient elven and dwarven burial cairns. Witnesses say that he claims to be Manshoon, searching for "the wands they stole from me." He promises wealth and power to those that aid him, and swift and painful death to those that refuse.
- The quietest and rarest of rumors is also the most terrible: that the various clones of Manshoon were activated by the archwizard, who now waits in the shadows for the destruction of the last of them. When that event occurs, the One True Lord of the Zhentarim will emerge, possessing the accumulated power and knowledge of his various selves. On that day, Manshoon will sweep across Faerûn, gathering the caches of items left behind by his copies and laying waste to all that once stood in his way.

About the Author

Brian Cortijo is a freelance game designer who plays about in the Forgotten Realms setting far too often. His recent credits include "Swords of State" and "Crowns and Mantles" in *Dragon* 407 and "Cormyr Royale" in *Dungeon* 198.

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Songs of Sorcery

By Alana Abbott

Illustration by Beth Trott

There is nothing quite like breaking into song during a Dungeons & Dragons® game to make your friends appreciate your presence at the table—or give you funny looks. Though some DMs might develop a playlist to use during a game session, that doesn't preclude the possibility of contributing to the group's adventures with your own vocalizations. To enhance your roleplaying, you can sing a quick ditty when your character casts a spell, intone a chant when your band of adventurers needs a prayer, or perform a few measures of a ballad to showcase the undeniable power inherent in music.

The notion of music possessing magical power is not a new one. Orpheus charmed his way out of the Underworld of Hades through the power of song. Amergin, the druid-poet of the Milesians, brought about the defeat of the Tuatha Dé Danann through the magic of his lyrics. Ancient tales and proverbs talk of music having the power to tame beasts and heal tormented spirits.

In D&D, integrating magical music into the game is usually the bard's job. Though the following discussion and the alternative rewards presented here are aimed primarily at bards, any player who wants to adopt these expressions of magic through music can do so and bring a little melodic flavor to the table.

Powers and Songs

The D&D® Compendium is full of powers that use the word "song." Most of these are bard powers, as if the bard might take on the role of cheerleader at times. When you want to embrace this role in a tongue-in-cheek way, a fight song might be appropriate.

The bard power *inspiring refrain* (*Player's Handbook® 2*) begs for a football-style anthem. Put the following lyrics to the tune of "On, Wisconsin!"

Onward heroes, onward heroes!
Fight until we win!
Hack and slash, thrust, parry, bash,
On through till battle's end. (U-rah-rah)
Onward heroes, onward heroes!
Plow through the fray.
Fight, allies, fight, fight, fight!
We'll win this day.

Some bards have garnered a reputation for being as good at fleeing battle as they are at facing it. As such, some bard powers could be paired with a less heroic melody. Consider setting your *song of speed* (*Arcane Power*™) to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

Run, run, little feet
Hurry up your pace
Dodge the swords and spells and prayers
Don't let them hit your face!

A power such as *counterpoint* (*Arcane Power*) merits its own drum solo (in which case the solo from "Wipeout" can come in handy, assuming the gaming table can handle some hand drumming). Alternatively, a rhythmic jump-rope rhyme can synchronize your foes' attacks and your allies' responses as neatly as a

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game of double Dutch. For example, sing this to the tune of "Miss Mary Mack."

Oh, you can strike, strike, strike
Oh, you can cut, cut, cut
But when you miss, miss, miss
We'll kick your butt, butt, butt!

Now, you don't have to let bards have all the fun. Arcane casters of all kinds can make use of melody to enhance their powers, turning a chanted spell into a reflection of the music of the spheres. *Symphony of the Dark Court* (from *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*™) is just one example of a wizard power that naturally lends itself to song. Try it to the tune of "Greensleeves."

IMPROVISING

As of this writing, more than sixty powers in the D&D Compendium feature words such as "song" or "hymn" in their titles or descriptions. To have some musical fun with such powers, select a familiar children's song such as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," then set a pair of rhyming phrases to its first two lines. A power that puts you on the attack could use, "All my allies I impress / While my foes feel great distress." A defensive power could go with a rhyme similar to this: "If you try to cleave my head / You will soon wish you were dead." If you are one of those rare improvisational experts who can come up with rhymes on the spot, there's no need to rehearse. If you aren't, take a look at your powers and try to come up with a tune that fits the flavor of the power and your characters before attaching any lyrics.

Be still, my foes, your end is near
But do not let it trouble you
Relax as now your fate grows clear
Don't fight it, accept it as true
This moment shall be your death
For you will recover too late
Enjoy the time that you have left
Breathe deeply, accepting your fate

Players of divine characters can adapt hymns and other forms of sacred songs to lend their characters a little music. A cleric might hum quietly while using *healing word* during a short rest—or sing loudly along to the *harmony of blades* power (*Neverwinter*™ *Campaign Setting*). You could sing these words to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Ring out, o faithful weapon to defeat the enemy
We strike out, secure in righteousness and armed for glory
We shall meet our foe with valor to secure our victory
Our blades shall overcome!

Alternative Rewards

Imagine a song whose very essence is magical. Such a magic song could never be stolen from you, and as long as you remembered the tune and the words, you'd have everlasting access to its power.

Because a magic song cannot be purchased at a marketplace, the cost of such an item represents the amount a character needs to pay to learn the song.

Charm of Making

To the tune of "Auld Lang Syne":

From nothingness make wonderment
From ignorance grow wise
Create the world you wish to see
And let that be your prize.

And let that be your prize, dear friends
And let that be your prize
Create the world you wish to see
And let that be your prize.

Charm of Making Level 25 Uncommon

Your song captures the breath of the world serpent, harnessing the power of life and knowledge into an omen of making.

Alternative Reward: Grandmaster training 625,000 gp

Property

You can perform the rituals Ease Spirit, Leomund's Tiny Hut, Make Whole, and Primal Grove as if you had mastered them.

Utility Power ✦ Encounter (Minor Action)

Effect: You create a nonmagical object in your free hand or in an unoccupied square you touch. The object can weigh up to 10 pounds and be worth no more than 50 gp. The object lasts until you use this power again.

Utility Power ✦ Daily (Minor Action)

Effect: You gain training in Arcana, Nature, and Religion until the end of the encounter. If you are already trained in any of the noted skills, you gain a +5 item bonus to that skill instead.

Ease the Soul

To the tune of "Red River Valley":

Come and sit by my side and listen
May my tune for your wounds be a balm
If my words and my music are pleasing
May your soul fill with peace and with calm.

Ease the Soul Level 15 Uncommon

Your song brings solace to a tormented creature, releasing it from its suffering.

Alternative Reward: Grandmaster training 25,000 gp

Utility Power ✦ Daily (Minor Action)

Effect: Ranged 10 (one ally). The target takes damage equal to its bloodied value and removes a single enduring effect as if subjected to the Remove Affliction ritual.

THEME SONGS

A hero could have a unique theme song, spreading word of his or her name and adventuring prowess. Many classic movie and TV themes come ready-made with a name that's easy to substitute—consider the song from the classic cartoon *Mighty Mouse*, for example. Pop songs can also be a great source of inspiration for heroic themes. "My Hero" by Foo Fighters, "Holding Out for a Hero" by Bonnie Tyler, or even "Kryptonite" by Three Doors Down could be adapted to celebrate your character to friends and foes alike. Find a song that you and your character would like to hear every time you walk into a room and see if there's a way to make that song your own.

Restful Lullaby

To the tune of "Brahms's Lullaby":

Close your eyes, then breathe deep
As though you've been asleep
Now you're rested and restored
Good health shall be your reward.

Restful Lullaby Level 12 Uncommon

After singing this short song, you and those around you feel rested and refreshed.

Alternative Reward: Grandmaster training 13,000 gp

Utility Power ✦ Daily (Minor Action)

Effect: Choose yourself or an ally within 5 squares of you. That character can use second wind as a free action, even if it has already been used during this encounter.

Song of Destruction

To the tune of "It's a Small World":

It's a world of slaughter, a world of tears
It's a world of woe and a world of fears
Now I'll laugh while you cry
'Cause it's your turn to die!

Song of Destruction Level 25 Uncommon

The cacophonous power of this song brings destruction to those who hear it. In the wake of its discordant melody, disaster follows.

Alternative Reward: Grandmaster training 625,000 gp

Property

You gain a +10 item bonus to damage rolls against objects.

Utility Power ✦ Encounter (Minor Action)

Effect: You shatter a nonmagical object made of crystal, glass, ceramic, porcelain, or other fragile material adjacent to you. The object can weigh no more than 10 pounds.

Attack Power (Thunder) **✦ Daily** (Standard Action)

Attack: Close burst 3 (enemies in the burst); +28 vs. Fortitude

Hit: 2d8 + 10 thunder damage, and the target falls prone. The target is also weakened (save ends).

Miss: Half damage, and the target is weakened until the end of your next turn.

Soothe the Savage Beast

To the tune of "Hush Little Baby":

Hush little creature, do not fear
I'm your friend and I am here.
Calm your temper, take a rest
Certain that your friend knows best.

Soothe the Savage Beast Level 4+ Uncommon

This song lulls an animal into complacency with its dulcet tones.

Lvl 4	840 gp	Lvl 19	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	2,625,000 gp

Alternative Reward: Grandmaster training

Attack Power (Charm) **✦ Encounter** (Minor Action)

Attack: Ranged 5 (one beast); item level + 3 vs. Will

Hit: The target cannot attack (save ends). This effect ends if the target is attacked.

About the Author

Alana Joli Abbott has written several adventure scenarios for RPGA® campaigns, from Living Kingdoms of Kalamar™ to Xen'drik Expeditions™ and Living Forgotten Realms®, as well as fiction, comics, and historical articles. When not rewriting Greek or Norse mythology in her home games, she blogs about writing and mythology on her home page at www.VirgilandBeatrice.com.

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DARK·SUN CAMPAIGN SETTING

Eye on Dark Sun

The Ghost Caravan

By Rodney Thompson

Illustration by Scott Murphy

In the deserts of Athas, mirages are as uncommon as the travelers that witness them. Images that appear before those who trek out into the silt are often lures into greater danger, either generated by malicious, mutated creatures in the deep wastes or simply the byproduct of a ravaged world. Even so, it is rare for two people, or two groups of travelers, to have the same vision; usually, each person's mind conjures its own images. The lone exception to this rule is the Ghost Caravan, which seems as though it could not be real . . . yet is a phenomenon that has been reported too many times to be dismissed as a mere trick of the mind.

All tales of the Ghost Caravan involve a train of wagons pulled and accompanied by frightening creatures that traverse the desert wastes where no one else would dare travel, following paths that go well beyond normal trade routes. The stories tell of a procession that includes spectral crodlus and insubstantial mekillots, giant scorpions, and an array of ghosts that appear to be on some forsaken journey, damned to forever roam the wastes as punishment for misdeeds in life. Bards across Athas sing of the Ghost Caravan, these perpetual travelers of the deep wastes, condemned to eternal wandering by some cosmic force.

The caravan's fearsome reputation is enhanced by the claims of some tale-tellers that the Ghost Caravan grows in size as it moves—those who are unfortunate enough to cross the caravan's path are drawn in, added to the line of spectral travelers roaming the deep wastes.

In any of its versions, to whatever level of detail, the tale is one that inspires terror in desert-goers and makes city-dwellers peer cautiously over the walls into the desert beyond.

It's also a total fabrication.

Behind the Veil

The Ghost Caravan is actually a group of mercenary smugglers that operate outside the domain of the merchant houses and the sorcerer-kings. The Ghost Caravan travels dangerous, deep desert routes not because of some eternal damnation, but out of expediency: the chance of being spotted by someone who could expose their smuggling is small. Of course, even in the wastes of Athas, running into other people is inevitable, and eventually the Ghost Caravan must draw near enough to civilization to pick up and drop off its "merchandise." So the caravan and its leaders have taken steps to spread the notion that

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they are a dangerous group of phantoms who might steal a person's soul and add it to their troupe. The tale works well enough; anyone who sees the Ghost Caravan by accident is sure to stay away, further reducing the caravan's exposure.

The leader of the Ghost Caravan is a human male named Terakkis Ment, an amoral mercenary who was once a slave in the city of Raam. Ment escaped from captivity at a young age, became a smuggler, and over time developed a reputation as a competent criminal. However, every time he chose to operate within a city, he disliked living with the risk of being captured by templars, and so he decided to create the Ghost Caravan as a cover for his smuggling operation.

Terakkis Ment cares only about two things: money and freedom (his, that is). As such, every action he takes is to either get more of the former or ensure the latter. Ment and the Ghost Caravan smuggle goods for anyone who can pay for the service; he has, within a span of weeks;, taken on contracts with the Veiled Alliance, Andropinis, and a collective of slave tribes, ignoring the conflicts of interest between these clients and fulfilling all his business obligations.

The kinds of contracts that Terakkis Ment and the Ghost Caravan take on usually entail smuggling large quantities of contraband between city-states. The caravan is capable of delivering a significant load of goods; unlike most other smugglers, whose capacity is limited by what they can conceal from observers, the Ghost Caravan carries its loads unencumbered by the need to physically conceal them—because anyone who views it from afar sees only a ghastly train of floating spectral forms.

Apparition or Illusion?

The Ghost Caravan's primary means of concealment takes the form of elaborate illusions that are woven over the members and the wagons of the caravan. Ment employs a small number of arcane spellcasters who specialize in illusion magic to create the appearance that everything in the caravan is some kind of spectral creature. Some of the illusionists cast glamers over the caravan's members, making them look like ghostly versions of themselves. Others are responsible for obscuring the caravan's tracks, ensuring that no trace is left behind—a detail fitting the cover story of an incorporeal procession. When the caravan's scouts detect a potential encounter, one of the illusionists' tasks is to create an image of several creatures breaking off from the caravan, headed toward the observer. Usually, the sight of several spectral creatures from the Ghost Caravan making their way toward a bystander is enough to scare off even the most curious watcher.

Since arcane magic is extremely dangerous (and forbidden by the sorcerer-kings), these illusionists must operate covertly. Because they are so essential to maintaining the mystery of the Ghost Caravan, they have few opportunities to leave the caravan, and in many ways are prisoners of their own prowess. This situation presents a good opportunity for some people who might be looking to ingratiate themselves with Terakkis Ment and his illusionists. These spellcasters often have need of components for their rituals, and though Ment and the Ghost Caravan deal in contraband, such items are still tough to come by. Anyone seeking to gain the favor of the Ghost Caravan would be wise to bring an offering of this sort to any such meeting.

Some of the illusions and enchantments woven by the Ghost Caravan's casters have long-lasting effects. If a bystander is not deterred by the illusory phantoms of the Ghost Caravan, Ment orders his casters to put malicious magic on the intruder, which leaves that person babbling and insane. Merchant houses that deal with the caravan and whose agents have been so affected have been known to offer significant bounties for the deaths of these spellcasters.

The Bards' Tales

Knowing that it takes more than magic to scare off the most curious of seekers, Terakkis Ment has spent years recruiting and retaining the services of bards throughout the city-states. Because bards are among the foremost spies and assassins on Athas, this gives Ment an advantage in two arenas. First, anyone who appears to get too close to the secrets of the Ghost Caravan might become the target of an assassination ordered by Ment. The other role that these bards serve is the spread of disinformation. The bards in Ment's employ disseminate false rumors and exaggerated stories about the Ghost Caravan, ensuring that the prevailing "common knowledge" about the ghost caravan is filled with stories of specters, phantoms, and other ghostly undead—the kinds of tales that deter travelers from getting too close. Over the years, tales of the Ghost Caravan have become a favorite, and oft-requested, set of bardic songs in the halls of nobles and templars throughout the city-states.

The bards that Ment employs are also usually the primary means by which clients broker deals with the Ghost Caravan. Since the caravan spends much of its time in the wastes, prospective clients have few opportunities to approach Ment directly. Clients usually seek out the bards in Ment's employ, bribing them to serve as intermediaries between the clients and the caravan leader. There is always a risk associated with approaching one of Ment's bards, though; if the bard determines that the client's proposal is not lucrative enough, he or she might instead attempt to kill the client—thus silencing one more person who knows the true nature of the Ghost Caravan.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an advanced designer for Dungeons & Dragons R&D at Wizards of the Coast, originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. His credits for the Dungeons & Dragons® game include the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting* and the *Dark Sun® Creature Catalog™*, *Monster Vault™*, *Player's Option: Heroes of the Feywild™*, and *Lords of Waterdeep™*.

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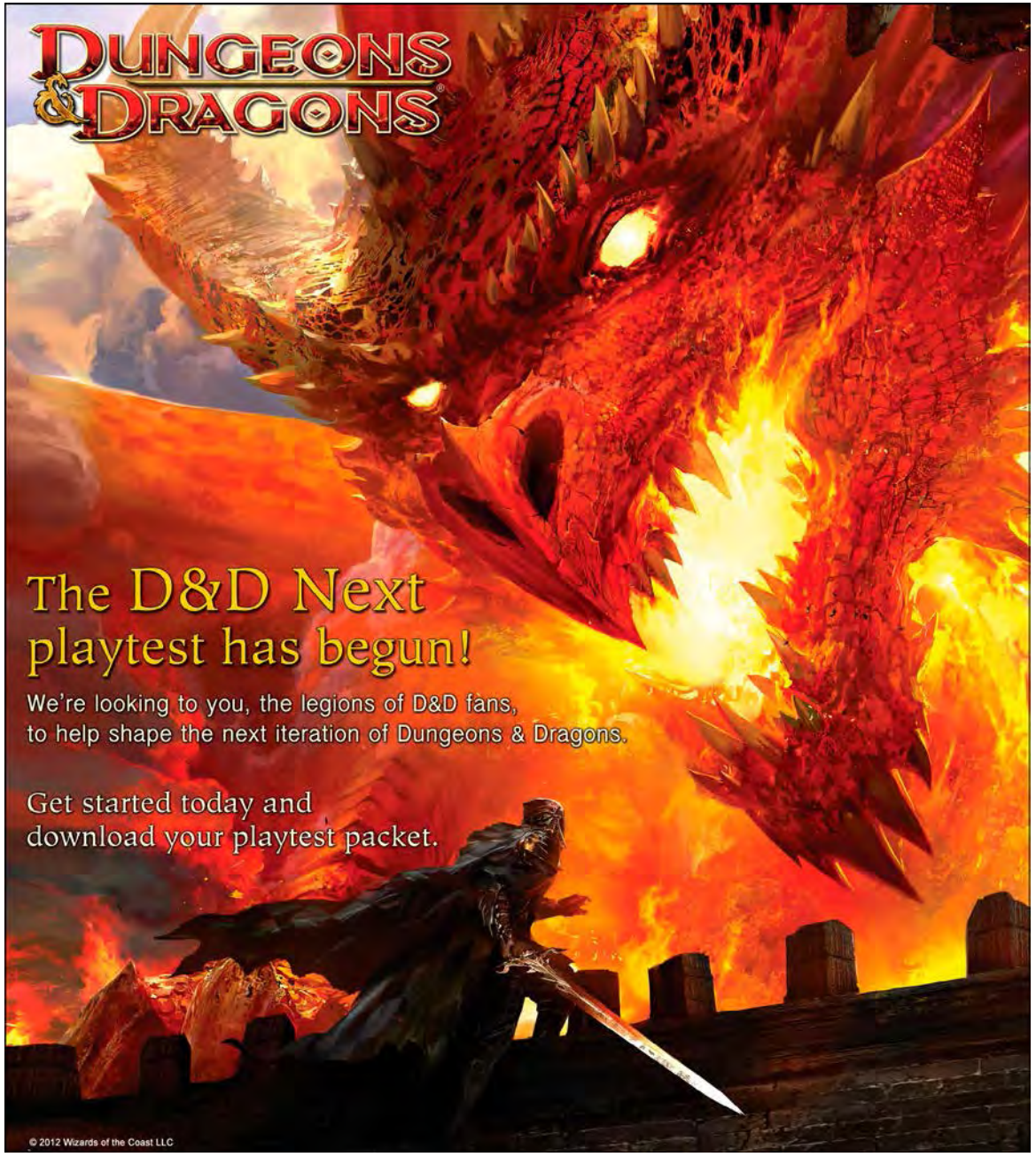
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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

Ed Greenwood's Eye on the Realms

The Haunted Battlement

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Tyler Walpole

Word is now spreading—after a fourth recent suicide, by someone who leapt from the battlement in terror—of a haunted wall-walk atop a fortress in Calimshan. For decades, the booted tread of an unseen guard has been heard striding along these battlements, following a discernible patrol route. Those who stand in the path of this haunting (so that the unseen walker "passes through" them) feel an intense chill and receive a vivid, soundless vision of a dead-and-gone pasha hiding an item somewhere within the fortress. It's always the same pasha, but a different item and place each time. Presumably, these visions offer guidance to where treasure might lie hidden, though there's no guarantee that either the item or the hiding place still exists, and identifying the place is left to the receiver of the vision.

Every mortal can experience only one such vision; any effort to receive another one yields no information.

Who was the pasha? Why was he seemingly hiding his treasures? How did this curious haunting come about? Why does an unseen guard impart visions of the acts of someone else? And why, after decades of relatively harmless consequences, have the visions begun to drive their viewers to suicide?

The Phelhelra

The Phelhelra is a fortress in northern Calimshan. It stands on an outlying foothill of the Marching Mountains at the eastern edge of the Calim Desert, near Mount Abbalayat and due north of Faeressar (but across several ridges from there). The fortress was raised from 371 DR through 374 DR, and it served as the seat of power of Satrap Radraud el Qarylyrskal. He was responsible for border security against raiders and smugglers out of Tethyr, and against attacks by monsters and brigands from out of the Marching Mountains. The Phelhelra was a barracks for local Calishite troops and a center of governance. As one anonymous surviving record of the time says, "Its innermost chambers held a tiny echo of the splendor of the great cities" of Calimshan at the time. The fortress was named for the widowed satrap's daughter,

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Phelhele, who grew up within its walls—but who vanished in a dark-hours raid of nighthaunts in 389 DR, in her twentieth year. The creatures were clearly sent to capture her, but none ever discovered who was responsible for sending them. Some evidence indicates that Phelhele cooperated in the "kidnapping"; either way, she was never heard from again. Her disappearance aged the satrap greatly, and he sank into frail mumblings and died in his bed in the Phelhelra five years later. His successors were lesser men.

In 466 DR, after the demise of the Shoon Imperium, the Phelhelra fell into the hands of Veherak el Paeredrhal, called "the Pasha of Purdrim," master of the mines of Purdrim, Alakhim, and Maeretelim. (These were short-lived gem mines in the Marching Mountains, with hundreds of narrow veins in high mountain caverns that yielded up an astonishing variety of gemstones[1].) The pasha dwelt there until his mysterious disappearance in 491 DR, when he is variously said to have been devoured by wyverns; taken wyvern-shape and departed the company of humans forever; or discovered a gate (portal) guarded by wyverns through which he fled from unidentified foes, never to return. These foes (so the claim goes) have skulked about the Phelhelra for centuries, spying on all later inhabitants and awaiting his return. Some say the current haunting is related to these foes, who might not have been human. Others disagree, citing the long time between the pasha's vanishing and the appearance of this haunting, which was first reported in 1437 DR.

The Phelhelra is a small, soaring cluster of tall, thin cylindrical gray stone towers crowning a hilltop that has been hollowed out into a series of vault-reinforced cellars. The towers are linked by a common defensive wall that is twenty feet wide at its top (the crenellated battlements) and flares to seventy feet thick or more at its base. The inside surface of this wall is crisscrossed by zigzag ramps and stairs, interrupted at various stages with platforms shielded by large awnings. The topmost three aboveground floors of each of the Phelhelra's towers (which vary in height from eighteen stories to eleven) consist of open-air chambers with large, arch-topped windows. The windows are used for observing the land below; firing ballistae and magonels; and noting the arrivals and departures of aerial steeds, messenger birds, and flying creatures that are the allies of the fortress occupants. The lower floors in each tower are living quarters; beneath them, the "Naeth" or "first below" level is made up of large chambers that connect the towers with one another. Matters of state involving large gatherings can be conducted here. The tiers below this level are used for garrison areas, pantries and storage cellars, and dungeons.[2]

In the current year, the Phelhelra is occupied by human miners from Tethyr, who are holding the genasi (and the orcs and ogres of the mountains) at bay with the aid of the Janessar and magic swords found in the fortress. These swords can rend genasi at a touch because of enchantments that cause the very essence of elemental-related creatures to boil.[3] The human miners are interested in hiring adventurers to defend the fortress against nonhuman intruders. Miners and adventurers alike have stayed away from the lowest chambers of the fortress dungeons, where a gibbering orb is known to roam.[4]

The Pasha of Purdrim

Veherak el Paeredrhal was sponsored by wealthy and influential families of Calimport to oversee the mines in which they were investing. Born into a poor Calimport family, he rose swiftly in the service of various successful merchants and courtiers because of his glib tongue, masterful diplomacy, and shrewd judgment.

He was astute enough to stem the rising corruption of governing officials and courtiers involved in administering the output of the mines,[5] and did so swiftly and ruthlessly but without large scandals or ado. What his sponsors—and the highest and mightiest of Calimport—were slow to realize was that the Pasha of Purdrim didn't stop the local smuggling of outland goods in return for gems from the mines. Rather, he took over the trade and used it to purchase an ever-larger arsenal of magic items with which to defend his person and misguide magical surveillance from afar.

Veherak el Paeredrhal was a somewhat handsome man who knew exactly the right way to present himself (deportment and garb) and what best to say to appear as a trustworthy, likable, superior person. He was a superb actor in total control of his face and voice. He deceived many he dealt with on a daily basis, and before his disappearance he became the greatest smuggling lord on a coast rife with great smuggling lords.

While ruling the Phelhelra, the pasha favored mauve cloaks and robes, and he always went about armed with small dart-guns, daggers, and hissing vipers (harmless and defanged, though this detail he kept secret) that were apt to slither into view out of his collar, sleeves, or pouches and menace those nearby. He also wore a collection of magic items, and he hid dozens more behind panels and secret doors in the fortress, so they were near at hand and he could snatch them in case of attack.[6] He trusted no one, so he prepared his own food, procured his own drink, and kept servants at bay.[7]

The pasha was a skilled carpenter and "finisher" (expert at carving adornments on wooden surfaces), and he is believed to have modified many of the hiding places built into the panels, to better hide items he put there.[8]

The visions seen in the haunting are of the pasha hiding various magic items of his arsenal, almost certainly shifting them from place to place as he acquired more items and refined his endlessly

reworked personal defense plans. Certain surviving writings (personal accounts by servants) suggest that the pasha's mounting paranoia had solid cause; he was stalked and watched in the Phelhelra by an "unseen presence" that he assumed was magical, a spectral undead, or some sort of insubstantial living creature, since the fortress held no secret passages he was unaware of. He took to wearing a ring that surrounded him with an ancient mantle defense to try to keep this observer at a distance. The pasha is known to have hired several outlander mages[9] to ascertain the nature of the presence, but the writings reveal nothing of what they uncovered—or, more likely, failed to discern.

The visions usually depict the pasha hiding rings, bracers, or metallic scepters or rods in various hidden storage niches around the Phelhelra. Some of the locations in the fortress have been identified (sliding thumb boards set into the tops of doors or under the edges of ornamented door hinges are favorites), but not surprisingly, those identified hiding places are now empty.

The Haunt on the Walls

The haunting that inhabits the Phelhelra is rumored to have been present for centuries, growing steadily stronger and "larger" as it widened its reach through the fortress. Other rumors claim it crept out of the "deep darkness beneath the mountains" or is the mad remains of the pasha's vanished daughter Phelhele . . . but no rumor-offerer knows the truth.

What is known is that the haunting can be felt anywhere in the fortress as a cold, malignant awareness associated with a dimness in the air (shifting, elusive dark shadows where no shadows should be). Individuals feel a chill, even when near a warm fire in a hearth, and they have an intense sensation of someone or something unfriendly watching their every move.

The mage Sarklan of Calimport believes the apparition is some sort of intelligent, insubstantial undead that can achieve enough solidity to harm the living only where the magical wards have failed—in a few specific rooms and along the battlements. Those magical auras are now gone, and their former boundaries now describe the areas where this haunting can harm the living.

Sarklan visited the towers in the spring of 1476 DR at the behest of Arhult Maerdellyn of Zazesspur, a wealthy ore merchant who is the current Lord of Phelhelra, or resident commander of the fortress. His recent study of the haunting concludes that it can be forced back and faced in safety by anyone who is within a properly warded area.

The four humans who recently leaped to their deaths—all toward the outside, not into the hilltop area enclosed by the walls—were a miner and three hired adventurers who, Sarklan believes, had no connection with one another. The first was an Amnian gemcutter and miner, Phaeryn Dyskult, a crafter inspired by dreams of great wealth. The second, Aumbrae Hornshulder, was an adventurer from Berdusk who had a deep fear of the undead. The third, Ollyn Marbruk, was a Tashlutan rogue of great agility and much adventuring experience. The fourth, Flarm Lhesklar of Elturel, was a stolid warrior trained and experienced in guardianship.

The Dark Truth

Elminster knows rather more than Sarklan.[10] To his eye, the haunt of Phelhelra is actually a rare, unnamed-in-written-lore form of undead akin to a caller in darkness,[11] but of five or six times the size and strength of a typical one of that sort. Everything Sarklan says about fighting the creature is correct, and it is insubstantial and nigh transparent unless it wills itself to more visible and substantial shape—which it must do to drain life force, which requires direct contact (usually it "rushes through" a chosen victim) and is an act of will, not an automatic attack or property of contact.

A wizard who knows how—such as some Imaskari and more recent Halruaan mages, the former by experimentation and the latter by correctly interpreting and trying written Imaskari records—can embrace this form of undeath instead of lichdom. This sort of entity is anchored to a particular object or group of objects (in this case, Elminster guesses, specific magic items hidden by Veherak el Paeredrhal and not moved since), and so it remains in a particular place and can't venture far, unless or until the item or items are moved.

Elminster advocates that since most of these undead are unique in their powers, each one be referred to according to where it lurks, so this one he calls "the Phelhelra." Understanding that sages whose lives will never depend on the differences between specific hauntings created by this obscure process will inevitably desire a collective name for all such creatures, he suggests "castle gloom" or "tower gloom," because although quite a few haunt and guard their own tombs, almost none of the places these undead are found are underground or unfortified.

Notes

1. The warrenlike Purdrim caves and the much smaller Maeretelim deep-tunnel mine both held large clusters of the rare elralenth stone, an amber-hued crystal that a handful of mages learned how to melt and enchant into a colorless, transparent, incredibly hard (yet durable rather than brittle) coating for metal armor that warded off rust and made solid visors that could be seen through. Though glassteel and other magical means of making glass armor since have been perfected, some old Calishite mentions of "glass armor" refer to metal armor coated with

elralenth. Metal armor could be made lighter and more easily curved into spires and flutings by using thinner and flimsier sheets, then coating them with elralenth to make them as hard and durable as the thicker stuff.

2. A natural spring rises from within the hill beneath the Eiyaerat, the tallest and broadest tower of the fortress. The water is pumped throughout the fortress by means of manual labor in various tower chambers, a mule-circle-run main pump, and extensive pipes. Wastes are discharged through vents in the outer walls on the Tethyr and desert sides of the hill. Many chambers within the Phelhelra are linked by small durthdra (dumbwaiter) shafts, in which open-fronted boxes are moved up and down by means of pulleys, to raise and lower dome-covered food platters and other small items to double-doored cupboards in the various rooms. These shafts usually link adjacent floors or a line of three floors; a few provide transit over four floors, but none are "taller" than that.

3. These enchanted longswords are few in number and of unknown origin and construction; the alloy of which they're made is unique. They were found in the Phelhelra by human adventurers in 1467 DR, and aside from being nigh weightless, never rusting, and going dull far more slowly than most battle-forged steel, they are normal weapons—except when they touch creatures of elemental nature, which are almost always vaporized in an instant. In rare exceptions, such targets are instead maimed by having much of their flesh melted away. These weapons are forged all of one piece, each sharpened blade widening to a guard that then becomes a narrow grip, bounded by a large guard-shaped pommel.

4. Aside from the gibbering orb (which came from no one knows where, though gates and translocation spells have been suggested), lesser monsters of the Underdark skulk and slither in ever-increasing numbers, suggesting that the Phelhelra's lowest passages and the Underdark are now connected.

5. Many of these officials could not resist making deals with Tethyrian smugglers, who covertly brought all manner of goods from afar to the Phelhelra in return for gems from the mines.

6. The pasha had most of the bare walls of the lower tower floors and the Naeth paneled during his time, presumably to provide himself with hiding places for his arsenal of magic items. To this day, many of the splendid paintings on these panels survive, on ceilings as well as walls. Their longevity is partially due to their having been made with pigments into which gem dust had been mixed.

7. Aside from a few trusted messengers, the pasha's servants were under standing orders to depart any room he entered, without passing him to do so. If this wasn't possible, they were to move as far away from him as they could, touch a wall and then stand motionless facing it, and remain that way until he snapped his fingers or clapped his hands as he departed.

8. So, for example, an apparently empty hidden storage niche was really hiding (behind a removable piece of its interior side-frame) a catch that would release another nearby panel that had no direct trigger of its own.

9. Including the notorious adventurer wizard Anneth Aldredh of Karamhond (now part of Athkatla), he of the many wands and even more numerous apprentices, who after his death made war on one another. Every one of them sought to seize all the wands because Aldredh had once casually remarked, "Combine all of these, and no one, no matter how mighty their Art, will able to stand against the result."

10. Elminster judges Sarklan to be "the sort of young, vigorous spell-hurler who has been successful enough to make good coin and achieve an air of being masterful—which is a pity, because although he knows enough to be overconfident, he denies to himself as well as others that there are things he can't defeat, or even yet understand. In short, a recklessly dangerous man who acts as if he's nothing of the sort."

11. The caller in darkness is detailed under "Ghost" in the *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*™ supplement.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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